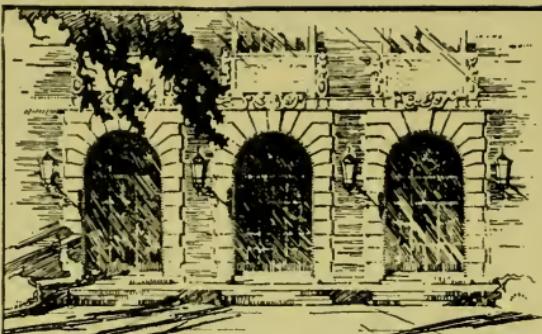




IN SIGHT OF LAND

BY
LADY
DUFFUS HARDY



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IN SIGHT OF LAND.

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A NOVEL.

BY

LADY DUFFUS HARDY,

AUTHOR OF "BERYL FORTESCUE," &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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CHAPTER XXI.

CROSS-PURPOSES.

MR. LEMAIRE did not sail for New York in the *City of Rome*, as he had fully intended to do, and was content to lose his passage-money. As he had only changed his mind on the day of sailing, there was no time to make other arrangements. When he returned to the Blackfriars Hotel—which was only a short time after Clarice had left it—and found the bird flown, he was for the moment dumbfounded. The bell-boy gave him Jack's card; he received it smiling blandly, as he inquired—
“Did the gentleman leave any message?”

“ Only what’s written on that card, sir.”

“ Thanks. I’m sorry I missed him,” he observed, as he slowly ascended the stairs, humming softly a French *chansonnette* as he went. Thus he took his punishment, and came up smiling, outwardly at least; his inward feelings he confided to no one.

He was puzzled to find how he had been checkmated just as he thought he had captured the queen! He could not conceive how his well-arranged little scheme had miscarried—just at the point of completion too! for in twelve hours they would have been at sea, safe from detaining hands. Where and how could Jack have found the clue to his doing? There was a puzzle beyond his powers of solution.

He had obtained his knowledge of Mr. Fleming’s movements easily enough. He happened to be going into the station to get an evening paper, and caught sight of

Mr. Fleming's luggage labelled on the platform—*voilà tout*. Thence his course was easy enough: the telegram was dispatched, and in obedience Clarice came. He had caught a glimpse of Katrina's face at the carriage window, and to separate Clarice from her was the work of a moment. Everything seemed as easy as A B C. The next morning they would have been at sea, and as he had taken the passages under a false name there would have been no clue, no possibility of tracking them; but at the very hour of completion his whole airy structure fell with a crash! For the present he was foiled, not beaten; he was by no means at the end of his resources.

He had no doubt that the law would at once give him the guardianship of his daughter; but to the law, for his own special reasons, he did not wish to appeal.

He had better avoid all contact with the legal profession. Meanwhile he would set himself to discover through what agency his discomfiture was brought about, that he might better know how to carry on his operations in future. Like the crafty gopher, he liked working underground. Can we ever tell how the game of cross-purposes is carried on? The invisible Fates are throwing the dice and weaving their tangled web all the while; and we go to work carefully, building and arranging our little plans, when lo! a breath of wind blows from an unknown quarter and our cherished schemes collapse like a house of cards—like “Humpty Dumpty,” never to be put together again.

Of course all Penally had been speedily made aware that Mr. Fleming had been taken seriously ill in Paris, and that Miss Lemaire had been summoned to his

bedside. They had seen her depart with much interest; great was the astonishment therefore when she returned the next day, accompanied by Mr. Fleming, hale and well; and the rumour soon circulated the village that she had been entrapped to leave Penally under false pretences. But why? by whom? and wherefore? Everybody wondered, but they were left to wander through the wilds of wonderland and chew the cud of reflection at their own pleasure. The questions remained unanswered, and another mystery was set down to the account at the Manor House. Would a general settling-day never come?

Clarice bore up bravely under the shock—and it was a great shock—of finding how near she had been to what she had dreaded all her life! Strange and unnatural it seems that a child should have such a horror of this unknown father's touch;

the sight of this unknown father's face ! But it must be kept in mind that Clarice was altogether in an abnormal condition. She had been affected before she was born by the miserable circumstances of her mother's life ; her nature had been created and moulded amid a very earthquake of the emotions, when that mother's nature, of which she was the invisible part, was appalled by the ghastly present and haunted by apprehensions for the future. Her terror of the man who had so cruelly used her—her dread lest her child should suffer as *she* had suffered—had affected the nature of that unborn child with a shuddering horror of him : she was born with it, as some are born with a horror of snakes or other noxious reptiles, which could not be lived down or reasoned away.

Well, after the first shock was over, Clarice relapsed, or seemed to relapse, into

a state of strange calm—not apathy, not indifference, but a thoughtful calm; which greatly puzzled Mr. Fleming, who was himself much disturbed. He did not know where to look for, or on which side to guard against, any future attack; for he knew M. Lemaire too well to believe he would sit down quiet after his failure; on the contrary, he would set all his ingenuity to the hatching of fresh schemes, the carving out a new road to the goal of his desires. If Clarice had been penniless he would never have taken the trouble to inquire whether she were living or dead; but since she had become the heiress to a splendid fortune, she had become the object of his concentrated affections. He considered himself, on the whole, as rather an injured man, defrauded of his rights by his own daughter! For if Mrs. Lemaire had lived she would have inherited; and as husband and wife

are one flesh, and as he knew so well how to manipulate his marital authority, *he* would have held all in the hollow of his hand! Now Clarice's dainty hand grasped all he coveted!

“She will marry that jackanapes, young Swayne,” he argued, “and all she has will pass into his possession and out of my reach for ever.”

Now if only he could contrive to get Clarice away from the loving guardianship of Mr. Fleming, he knew he should find no difficulty in forcing her to act according to his will; or, with her peculiarities, which would develope largely under his care, he could easily put her aside, if not in one way, in another, and take upon himself the administration of her property. This was the aim and object of his ardent aspirations; and all this Mr. Fleming knew full well, and realized the peril which surrounded

his darling. He knew that M. Lemaire had no conscience, no heart, and would hesitate at nothing.

It was not possible to obtain any legal protection for Clarice. The law can only grapple with things that *are*; it cannot fight against possibilities or war with “may be’s.” However convinced a man may feel at the evil intentions of another, unless the intentions be carried into effect there is nothing tangible to lay hold of. The air-drawn dagger, visible to one, is non-existent to the rest of the world. He also knew that his anxieties—for which his experience gave him such grave cause—if he ventured to express them openly, would be laughed at as “an old man’s foolish fancies.” If Clarice were only married, all would be well: all authority would lie in her husband’s hands; no father could interfere between them. Why was she—so weak in

many ways—so strong in her perversity? He did not believe that she had any objection to Jack personally. The doubts of her own fitness for the marriage state—the fear of *herself*—kept her from it; if that could be overcome—and surely, since things had touched her so nearly, that well might be—then this last move of M. Lemaire, which seemed so evil, might be the forerunner of great good.

He resolved to take the earliest opportunity of once more speaking to Clarice seriously upon the subject. Filled with these thoughts he returned home. He talked very little by the way; indeed there was no opportunity for confidential conversation, as the compartment was occupied by fellow-travellers all the way down. It was not really till they had reached home, that Clarice could give him all the details of her adventures. They dined *tête-à-tête*,

and as soon as dinner was over they went into the drawing-room. She wheeled his chair to the window, that they might enjoy the sweet air and look out upon the lovely night. She placed herself on a stool at his feet, her hands clasped upon his knees, and gazed wistfully into his face—but said nothing.

On ordinary occasions, and with small cause, she would be nervous and excited, shaken as by a storm of apprehension. Now that there was cause for alarm, and she had stood face to face with what she had most dreaded all her life, she was calm, and apparently unruffled by a thought! He could not comprehend her, and approached the subject he had at heart very cautiously.

“ My dear child,” he said, making the first move on the mental chess-board, “ I tremble when I think of what might have happened to you! It seems as though

some special providence had been told off to watch over my darling. You have had a very narrow escape."

"Yes—I suppose so," she responded, as though they were discussing a matter-of-fact affair.

"Do you quite realize what I mean?" he added, as he leaned forward and looked in her face. "You know what we have always dreaded? If he had succeeded in getting you away—the man who was cruel to the mother would have no mercy on the child."

"No—no mercy," in a slightly tremulous voice.

"It is no use for me to take you away from here, for evidently he keeps an eye upon our movements. He will watch as patiently as a cat watches for a mouse, and be always ready to spring. I see no way out of our difficulties."

“ You told me there was one way once,” she said, in a low voice, and blushed as her head drooped.

“ Yes ! ” he exclaimed, a flash of joy springing to his eyes. “ Clarice, my best and dearest child, are you thinking—will you consider that one way ? ”

“ You don’t think it would be wrong for me to—to think of that one way ? ” she said, shyly. Then speaking more rapidly, she added, “ Things and people do change sometimes—under new conditions ; they change with the circumstances that change round them, as though a quick sudden turn in the wheel of life sent them into a new atmosphere. If doctors can cure the body, why can’t God, in His own way, cure the spirit, and not let it always suffer ? I mean,” she added, forcing herself to speak more plainly in reference to herself than she had ever spoken before—she always

shrank from any allusion to herself. It evidently cost her an effort to say what she wanted to say now, but she said it—“I mean, do you think these fits of depression, these terrible nervous distractions that have afflicted me all my life, will ever pass away ? ”

“ My child, I think they *are* passing away,” he answered, sincerely. “ I feared that this last day’s doing would throw you into the darkest depths—and see how bravely you have born it ! Altogether you have been much better lately, have had fewer and slighter attacks. You must feel this yourself ? ”

“ Yes,” she answered, “ I do feel it ; for the first time in my life I have hopes of myself ! Dad, darling, I begin to think there may be something—something coming into the life of your poor Clarice—better than darkness and despair. Some strange

revolution is going on within me; my better self is struggling against my worse."

"That is as it should be," he answered, cheerfully; "to struggle against an evil is the first step towards overcoming it. Once sheltered in the love, secure in the devotion, of a true man, you will live a new life, and learn to look back on these dark days as on a dream that is past."

"Pray Heaven it may be so!" she murmured, and bent her head upon her hands, silent for a moment as though her heart was lifting the prayer to God.

"My darling, you have made me very happy!" he added, taking a header into his own conclusions. "An hour ago my heart was as heavy as lead; now it is as light as a feather! I feel as though I could loose the weight of years from my limbs and leap into the air! Indeed I feel so universally glad, I—I could even shake hands with my

worst enemy — even with your father, now!"

"*Father?* Don't say that," she exclaimed, sharply; "I have *no* father but you—and One in heaven!"

"That's true—and—well, we'll let him drop—we'll think of him no more. Let me once set my darling child safe in a loving husband's arms, and the world may wag as it will. It has not another care for me. If I were to die to-morrow, I should die content."

"Darling and best of fathers! how you love me!" she rejoined, twining her arms about his neck.

"Ay—you and my boy Jack have had all my heart's love between you. The one hope, the one prayer of my life has been for this that has come about. You pretty piece of perversity!" he added, fondly. "I always thought you cared for him—a

little, though you were so wrong-headed and obstinate! However, 'all's well that ends well.' I'll write to Jack at once and tell him——”

“But, dad darling,” she exclaimed, interrupting him in some alarm, “I don't think you quite understand.”

“Oh yes! I understand quite enough; but perhaps it would come better from you,” he answered, thinking she desired to make the communication herself. She looked puzzled as she answered—

“I don't see any necessity for writing to Jack just yet. Of course I don't mind his knowing, but I don't think he'll care.”

“Not care!” echoed the jubilant old man, “when he has loved you all his life? Not care! when he learns that of your own free will——”

“Oh, stop! do stop!” she interrupted quickly; “we are all wrong—we don't

understand one another at all. Haven't I told you——”

“ You have told me quite enough—that you will make my old heart glad at last. The one great object of my life will be fulfilled: I shall give my child into the hands of a good, true man.”

“ But, father dear,” she said, gravely, “ there are other true men in the world besides—Jack.”

The whole expression of his face changed; he looked at her fixedly, inquiringly, as though some new idea had struck him, and he was not sure he had heard aright. He repeated her words slowly.

“ Other true and good men in the world besides Jack! Yes—but not for you, Clarice, not for *you*. There is no man in the world to whom I would entrust you except my Jack! If any other idea has come into your head, put it away as quickly as you can.”

“ You might as well ask me to put my life away ! Don’t be angry, father dear—it breaks my heart to grieve you ! ” A moment’s pause, then she added—and there was a strange pathos in her voice, “ You know how, all my life, I have been afflicted, groping through darkness and despair, a mystery and a dread to myself ; now that a ray of light is coming—has come—you *cannot* ask me to shut it out ! ”

“ No, my child, no ! ” he answered, finding it impossible to resist her soft, pleading tones ; “ but suppose this ray of light is but a will-o’-the-wisp, a kind of *ignis fatuus*, to blaze and dazzle for a day, and leave you in worse depths to-morrow ! ”

“ One never knows what may happen on any to-morrow ; besides, there never is a to-morrow—it is always to-day. Dad darling,” she added, nestling closer to his side, “ if it were not for this new hope, new *love*,

that has come into my life, how could I have borne the horror of what has threatened me to-day? Yet see, I smile and am happy! I feel as though no care, no trouble, could ever touch me any more—since *he* loves me!"

The old man groaned aloud.

"You think only of yourself, Clarice," he said in a trembling voice, as though the silver cord of his life was broken. He had built his hopes, concentrated his life-long desires, upon these two; they had been his joy, his very soul. Now they lived for him no longer! It was not Jack—it was another. A stranger had taken Jack's place. "You think only of yourself," he repeated; "you do not see the grief and bitter disappointment you cause to me and mine. With this cruel blow you have broken my heart."

"No, no; don't say that!" she exclaimed, passionately. "Because you cannot take

my heart in your hand and give it where you please, and work out *my* happiness according to *your* design, you say I have broken your heart! It is *you* who are cruel, not I! Why, you have always said that *my* happiness was your chief care; and now that you see I *am* happy, you want to drag me down, to take my one hope away, and push me back into the horrors I am leaving behind!"

The old man was struck by her simple honest plain-speaking; it was quite a new phase in her character. He could hardly believe that this was the weak, wavering, dreamy Clarice, who had always been as a child in his hands, swayed by every changing wind that blew! He ran his fingers through his white hair perplexedly.

"There is some truth in what you say, my child, God knows! I don't want to be hard, only——" He seemed to gulp down

some bitter thought as he added, with a ghastly smile : “Well, if you can’t be happy in my way, I—I must try to let you be happy in your own. And you must make allowance for me if I have seemed hard. You have taken me so by surprise.”

“But why should you be taken by surprise, father dear ? ” she answered. “I have never deceived you ; I have always said that I could never care for Jack in the way you wanted me to.”

“Yes, yes, I know,” he exclaimed ; “but I always thought that a day must come when you would change your mind. You have always been so soft and pliable in everything but this.”

“I suppose we have all a streak of granite in our nature somewhere—and you have struck on mine.”

Their conversation was here interrupted by a loud ring at the bell ; then Hugh’s

voice was heard in tones of eager inquiry. Clarice impulsively flung her arms round Mr. Fleming's neck, and, with love-light in her eyes and ardent pleading in her voice, exclaimed—

“ It is he ! Hugh ! my Hugh ! Father dear, *be kind !* Remember you hold my life—all the life I care to live—between you ! ”

“ The young villain ! I thought as much,” muttered Mr. Fleming, only half aloud.

In another moment Hugh—not the gay, debonair, laughing Hugh we know; but Hugh with a haggard, anxious face, with not the ghost of a smile left anywhere—stood in the open doorway.

CHAPTER XXII.

HUGH SOLVES THE DIFFICULTY.

AS Hugh's eager eyes fell upon Clarice he gave a great sigh of relief. All the old gladness flashed back into his face, as he impetuously caught both her hands in his, exclaiming—

“ My darling ! safe and well ! Thank God ! ”

A garbled and greatly exaggerated account of the late doings had been filtered through one channel of communication and another, till by the time it had reached the Rectory it was a distorted mass from which nothing

could be extracted clearly except that some terrible danger had threatened Clarice ! The moment this intelligence reached them, Hugh rushed off to learn the truth for himself ; and on arriving at the Manor House speedily discovered that the fable of the “ Three Black Crows ” had been once more illustrated by village gossip. For the moment Hugh had been so rejoiced at the sight of Clarice as to be quite oblivious of the presence of Mr. Fleming ; but immediately on realizing that substantial fact he stretched out his hand in the old cordial way, as he said—

“ My dear Mr. Fleming, pray excuse me ! For the moment I had no thought, no eyes for anything but Clarice. I suppose you know ”—he gazed inquiringly from one to the other—“ she has told you—— ”

“ Oh yes,” interrupted Mr. Fleming, in a slightly disgusted tone ; “ she has told

me that you have made fools of yourselves and one another."

"Happy fools—are we not, dear?" rejoined Hugh, looking fondly and proudly upon her face; "and I hope you'll not object to our folly?"

"When I have a bitter pill to swallow," he answered, "I make a wry face, as is natural: but in the end I gulp it down with a good grace."

"Oh, come! I'm not such a bitter pill as all that," said Hugh; "I shall not interfere with your digestion. And when you see how happy we are, you'll own that love, the real, honest article, is the most refreshing and invigorating tonic out."

"Love!" echoed the old man, rather contemptuously; "there are many other things in this world to be thought of besides 'love!' But there, I'm inclined to consider anything kindly that makes my

child look as she is looking now!" He gave a grudging sigh as he saw Clarice's happy, radiant face glow beneath her lover's gaze. "But there is no time to think or talk of anything to-night. We have had a long journey and a great deal of excitement; Clarice must rest. It is getting late; come in to-morrow and we'll have a talk and try to send a train of common sense through this fool's paradise of yours. But—no, not another word now. Say 'good-night' and part, this excitement will be too much for Clarice."

In vain she protested she was not tired in the least—that she was wide awake, and that her brain seemed all alive, like a mass of animated atoms; that she could not possibly rest, even if she went to bed. He insisted that she should at least try the experiment; so, reluctantly, they were compelled to say "good-night." It took a long

time to say it, but it was said at last—extracted from a mass of whispered words ; and Clarice stood in the pale moonlight watching her lover till he passed from her sight lost in the shadow of the dark, green woods.

Hugh was at the Manor House early next morning, and after half an hour's stroll in the garden with Clarice he was summoned to Mr. Fleming's study, and was there closeted with him for some hours. There was a great deal to be said, much more indeed than is usual on such occasions, on account of the many peculiarities surrounding Clarice's life. The old man had spent a great part of the night in thinking over matters, and decided that it would be only right and proper that a man who contemplated connecting himself with a family should be made acquainted with any special features of its history, especially those re-

lating to the lady of his choice. Slight concealments in the early days, the first flush of romance and love, lead to heavy consequences in after years, and give to each party the lamentable right to reproach the other—a right some few of either sex are given to exercise to their own confusion. Such rights, when they exist, it is wisest and best to forego.

Well, Mr. Fleming resolved that no seed should rest in the present that could yield a bitter harvest in the future; for a time comes when the most romantic, high-flying love-match must settle down on the level plains of life, and it is then, when the fever fit is over and things settle down to their normal state, that the pure peace and serene happiness of life begins, and either discord or harmony takes possession of the fireside. It is impossible to say, but perhaps a latent idea lingered in Mr. Fleming's

mind that when Hugh became acquainted with every feature in the family history, especially with Clarice's own morbid peculiarities, he might himself be frightened—as many men similarly situated would be—and, in common parlance, “cry off.” He never reflected what the effect of such a course of conduct would have upon Clarice—so blind are men in their love as in their hate!

But Hugh was not to be “frighted with false fire.” He would not quail before any “might be,” but was always ready to face “what is.” He was never known to look on the dark side of anything, however closely it was held to his view; he shifted his sight and looked on the gleam of light beyond. So long as there was the scent of a single rose-leaf in the air he never thought of thorns; and as for any sentimental maundering about the “canker-worm at the root of every flower,” his strong healthy

nature threw such poetical twaddle to the winds; so he was not disposed to look darkly on any pictured possibility while the love of his life held the foreground.

Mr. Fleming, therefore, as in honour bound, told him all Clarice's family history from her birth—nay, he took up the thread before her birth, and the morbid terrors and fancies that grew with her growth and haunted all her life; his own unfortunate marriage with her mother—the dread of disgrace, and all the miseries ending in her death which followed it; how, in carrying out her dead mother's last wishes, he had been travelling with Clarice for the last few years in order to keep her from falling into her father's hands, and how, since she had become the heiress in her mother's right to a large property, he had sought diligently to obtain possession of her—and confided to him his own well-grounded fears on that

subject ; how he had at last traced them to Penally—was, indeed, the injured stranger who had been received there—how he had been fought with and for the moment driven away. Lastly he informed him of the false telegram which had decoyed Clarice to London, and all that followed thereupon.

Hugh listened gravely and without comment until he had spoken his last word. Hugh had quietly gathered all the information into his mental digester ; he was able to comprehend the situation perfectly, but was not disposed to move one iota from his original position respecting Clarice. He did not seem excited or much moved in any way.

“ Well,” he said, coolly, seeing that Mr. Fleming waited for him to speak, “ you have shown me a hideous and unnatural side of human nature. As for Lemaire—faugh ! it is too nauseous to think of him.

He's not fit to live. But let the past go ; we have the future to think of. Only give me Clarice, and he and the devil may hunt in couples till they land themselves in their own blazes, for what I care ! ” And this was all the comment this thoughtless young man made on Mr. Fleming’s tragic revelations.

“ But do you quite comprehend the delicacy—the morbid tendencies of my child’s nature ? Do you realize the uncertainty of development, the watchful care and attention that is necessary to her state ? ”

“ I don’t realize anything about it,” said Hugh, bluntly, and rather resentfully. “ I only know that she is as fragile and delicate in mind and body as *I* am strong and healthy ; and as we catch disease by contact with the flesh, why should not we catch health and strength by contact with the spirit ? I believe that in the fusion of two

lives the stronger affects the weaker, and that *my* vigorous nature will stimulate and strengthen *hers*. I shall have no thought, no care but for her, and to her I shall devote my life. I couldn't say more if I was to talk till doomsday."

"It is easy talking—the doing is the difficulty," said Mr. Fleming.

"When people love one another as we do, everything comes easy."

"I suppose you have ascertained before this," said the old man, with one of his keen, suspicious glances, "that the man who marries Clarice takes no dowerless bride? When she is of age—which will not be for a year or more—she will come into possession of the fortune that would have been her mother's."

"Eh!" exclaimed Hugh, taken somewhat by surprise; "well, no, I can't say that I have taken that into consideration

at all! You see we have not got to the cash account yet. Until this moment I have never thought whether Clarice were penniless—I have thought only of herself.” Seeing an incredulous look come over Mr. Fleming’s face, he added quickly, and with more warmth than was usual with him: “You may believe me or not, I don’t care a straw for Clarice’s money! I’m not the sort of fish to hover about a golden bait. I would rather work for her than not. I’ve got talent, I know, and I don’t mean to wrap it up in a napkin, either. I shall wrap my head up in wet towels, as I’ve heard other fellows do, and grind hard. I shall go through a regular course of mental gymnastics till I can reach the top bar at a bound.”

“It is all very well talking,” said Mr. Fleming, impatiently—for Hugh’s buoyant lightness irritated him—“but there is much

to be considered and discussed before things can be allowed to go further between you two."

Hugh's face fell.

"You can't hinder our loving one another," he answered; "you may give us trouble and worry, but the more you are against us, the stronger we shall pull together. Look here, sir, let us lay our cards on the table and look at facts as they stand. An hour ago it seemed to be your one great anxiety to keep Clarice from falling into—that monster's hands."

"It was and is my chief anxiety," answered the old man, slowly.

"Well, it seems to me there's nothing easier. Look here now, Mr. Fleming; only give your consent, and I'll run up to town to-morrow, get a license, marry Clarice the next day—and there you are! Don't you see?" he added with much satisfaction, as

though he had suggested a most diplomatic and brilliant move. “I shall be her natural protector then ; and the old sinner may make any move he likes—he’ll be checkmated at the onset ! He may appeal to the law and bring down a whole army of lawyers against us : *I* take the field with our marriage certificate, and they are routed in confusion ! Why, it will be all plain sailing if I take an oar in the boat.”

The audacity of such a proposal for the moment dumbfounded Mr. Fleming ; it seemed actually to take away his breath. His conventional ideas received quite a shock !

“ You must be mad to think of such a thing,” he said, almost indignantly. “ You talk of carrying Clarice off by a *coup de main* as though she were a milkmaid. No, no ; all things having any reference to Clarice must be carried out in the orthodox, time-

honoured fashion. There can be no such thing as marriage talked of for some time yet."

"'Pon my soul, I don't see why not!" said the obtuse young man.

"There are many legal formalities to be gone through—settlements to be made, and many other matters to be looked into; for her interests must be well protected."

"I think only of *her*," exclaimed Hugh, keeping to his point; "and of the most expedient way of securing *her* safety. *That* seems to me to be the only thing worth thinking about, if there is really any reason for your fears—though I must own it seems to me most monstrous that the greed for wealth and power should urge a man against his own child to the terrible extent you seem to fear."

"The child he had never seen till the enforced meeting yesterday," said Mr. Flem-

ing, interrupting him quickly ; “ the child whose mother he cruelly injured and hunted to death ! Yes, it *is* monstrous, it is exceptional—but it is *true*. To an unscrupulous man, without heart or conscience, nothing is impossible. He regards Clarice as a bar to what he covets, and at the expense of her liberty—ay, even of her life—he would *remove* her, if he could do so with safety.”

“ Thank God, he can’t do that, in this land at least ! ” exclaimed Hugh.

“ No ; but once in his custody he might take her to other countries, where disease lingers in the air, and fever’s hot hand would save him from the actual sin of——”

Hugh did not wait for him to finish the sentence ; he paced the room with angry, rapid strides, exclaiming—

“ My God ! you dare to contemplate these horrible possibilities, and yet refuse to take the one step that would place her,

now and for ever, beyond the reach of all ! Forgive me, but I can hardly believe either in the sincerity of your love or of your fears. Why in the midst of all this you talk of 'legal formalities,' 'settlements,' and 'financial arrangements,' as though you were managing a matrimonial sale in Mayfair ! Fling all these considerations to the wind, and let us think only of Clarice. If you will not agree to my mode of securing her safety, *I* shall not rest till you have found some other."

" You need be under no anxiety," replied Mr. Fleming, coldly, half jealous of the young man's authoritative, *possessive* way of speaking. " *I* shall take all necessary precautions respecting my child. She is more to me than she can ever be to *you*."

" Don't know so much about that," answered Hugh. " She is your past, but she is *my* future ! See here, Mr. Fleming, we

both love Clarice, though in a different way, and we have both one object in view—her happiness and safety. You would take slow, cautious steps; I would make one bold stroke. No half-measures for me."

"And if I were insane enough to agree to your 'bold stroke,' and allow you to marry Clarice in this most extraordinary and sudden way (remember she has no fortune till she is of age), what would you do with her?"

"'Pon my word, I don't exactly know,'" answered Hugh, frankly. "You see, as the idea was only born ten minutes ago, I haven't had time to think about it—but I'd ensure her against starvation anyway; and Clarice in a cotton-gown, with a happy face and a light heart, with a mind at rest and my love warm and close about her, will be far happier than haunted, hunted, as she is now!"

There was a great deal of good, honest truth in Hugh's hasty suggestion that struck home to the old man's heart, and though he could not help regarding him as one who had stolen the rights of his "boy Jack," he respected him nevertheless. Still, he could not readily bring his mind to regard him in the position he aspired to fill; besides, the present aspect of affairs had been so lately presented to his view, that he had not had time to reconcile himself to the general view. Their ideas and feelings could not be expected to run in the same groove at the outset; but when each realized the sincerity of the other, though they took opposite sides of the question, they were able to discuss it in a more amicable manner.

They had a long talk, and by the end of the interview had argued themselves into a more amicable frame of mind. Mr. Fleming explained the course of action he in-

tended to pursue in regard to Clarice ; he would be watchful and careful, and certainly should remain at Penally for a time. He had no fears of any open violence ; Lemaire was always subtle and silent in his movements, but he did not apprehend any further annoyance from him for awhile at least. Before he made another move, he would probably wait till present events had faded into the distance. So they laid their ghost, and hid away the skeleton so that they would not hear its bones rattle.

Meanwhile, Mr. Fleming conceded this much to Hugh : he promised to put no obstacle in his way ; and if at the end of three months he and Clarice were of the same mind as now, he would then consider the subject of their speedy marriage. Hugh was compelled to admit that this was reasonable enough, and so that Clarice was safe in Mr. Fleming's guardianship he was content.

In fact, when he first entered the room he had expected to meet far greater opposition ; but since then everything was changed. Mr. Fleming's unexpected and startling communication had put all things in a new light. Of course Hugh would rather have had his own way and carried Clarice off at once—the excitement and romance of it would have been delightful ; but as that was not to be—well, he would turn his thoughts in another direction and look ahead.

They sat there making plans, deciding what should and what should not be, as though life were a chess-board, and they held the game in their own hands—no fear of Destiny giving them “checkmate.”

CHAPTER XXIII.

HALCYON DAYS.

DURING the week following the interview between Mr. Fleming and Hugh Spencer, Hugh and Clarice had some hours of every day together—the happiest hours they could ever expect to know. They walked in the glow of a pure first love, filled with radiant hopes, life's fairest prospect opening out before them—a very paradise! and their imagination marched straight on and took possession.

Hugh communicated to her so much of his interview with Mr. Fleming as concerned

themselves, and nothing more; no vexing word was allowed to reach her ears; all thoughts, doubts, or fears, that could cast a shadow over her were to be withheld. The past, as far as possible, was to be obliterated from her mind; her thoughts distracted therefrom, and directed towards a happy future, now so rich in promise—in fact, she was to be nursed back into peace and security, while loving friends kept watch and ward over her.

This was not so difficult a task; for Hugh being now the centre of her life, it was easy to group her wandering fancies, and concentrate her thoughts upon him. Meanwhile, by Mr. Fleming's desire, the present arrangement was not to be talked about; they were to keep silent upon the subject until the time should come when the engagement might be decided and publicly announced, and a near time fixed for their

marriage. The game of “love in idleness” was played out, and Hugh was to return to Cambridge, work hard, keep his last term there, and prepare himself for the life that lay before him. Clarice was reconciled to his going; to one of her dreamy, imaginative nature, actual and constant presence was not necessary to keep love alive.

“We shall not really be parted, Hugh,” she exclaimed, looking brightly up into his face, as they took their last stroll together on the night that he was to say “good-bye.” “How could we be?” she added. “I shall wander through our old haunts, and walk and talk with an invisible Hugh just as I am walking and talking *now*. I shall hear your voice in everything, and when I shut my eyes I shall see you plainly still. You know in the old dark days, rivers, and trees, and flowers, everything had a tongue—the

wind was full of voices, and men and women talked with the unseen spirits of those who had passed into the land of shadows. To some people, I think, things are the same now ; only it will be the spirit of my living Hugh, not of the dead, that will walk and talk with me."

Clarice's fanciful way of looking at things was always rather misty to Hugh ; it did not quite come home to his understanding. He gave an extra pressure to the little hand that lay in his, and turned a pair of eager, loving eyes upon her face as he answered—

" Ah ! all that sounds very pretty, and it means that we shall think of one another a great deal, but I'd rather be here in my own substantial person ! *I* don't take much stock in imagination—that is a purely feminine property. I like the genuine article —no dreamy shadow for me, but my own beautiful, bodily Clara, that I can hold in

my arms, and kiss the warm, soft lips as I kiss them now!" and he proceeded to demonstrate at once the bliss of the actual loving presence of the beloved.

Time glided on too quickly; the night closed in, and the hour came when they must say "good-bye." The long lingering was over, and they parted, as lovers part who hope to meet again upon some swift-coming to-morrow! Life flowed on in its old monotonous calm; the old routine was resumed at the Manor House. Clarice and Mr. Fleming took their rambles through the country, and along the shore, hunting for specimens for his collection—sometimes finding them. There was no visible change in their relations to one another, except perhaps that he was more tender and she brighter and happier than ever. They talked a little of Hugh; Mr. Fleming missed the high-spirited young fellow about

the house more than he chose to admit. He had identified himself so entirely with the old man's pursuits, and was always so full of mirth and gladness ; his very laugh was infectious, and his genial, happy face was as cheering as a ray of sunshine in the room. Of Jack they talked sometimes —of his pursuits, his prospects, and his future ; of the skeleton which they had hidden away they talked not at all. It could not be that they did not think of Lemaire, for there was no change in his position regarding them, and the danger to Clarice was as great as ever—greater perhaps, on account of his near proximity ; for he was still in London, according to the report of Jack, who admitted that he could gain no clue to any of his doings having any reference to *them*. However, it was impossible to blot him from their memory, though they might do so from their lips—

for often what is farthest from our lips is nearest to our hearts. They seemed to have concentrated all their thoughts and focussed their mental vision upon one bright spot. The kaleidoscope of life had turned, and given them a larger, broader view, a wider field on which to exercise their imagination ; where new-born hopes, fresh and strong, seemed to come straight down from heaven, and rout the dark fears that had haunted them all their lives, and sent them flying to the rear.

Clarice and Miriam were closer friends than ever ; each seemed to have a beneficial effect upon the other—the one grew more expansive and confiding, the other more sympathetic and more charitable in her ideas.

The Misses Laurence, large, loud, and hearty, occasionally swept in, like an invigorating north-easter, beaming with

health and good-nature, taking everything and everybody by storm. They formed a striking contrast to Miriam's sedate serenity ; sometimes they jarred upon Clarice, but on the whole such time as they spent together passed pleasantly enough. Occasionally they indulged in little musical gatherings—they rather prided themselves on their musical abilities ; as Stella said, “We are not a clever family ; we don’t set ourselves up as intellectual lights, but we *can* sing.” Like many other misguided mortals, they thought they did well what they really could not do at all ! To Clarice, whose very soul was attuned to music, who thrilled and responded in every fibre of her nature to every tone and touch of melody, these pretentious performances were a vexation an an outrage. Their tuneless voices set her nerves quivering painfully as though they had received a blow ; their *bravura*

songs were bad enough—they rushed up with a scream, came down with a crash, rushed in and out among *cadenzas* and *crescendos* as though they were playing hide-and-seek with their own voices, so twisting and distorting the original melody that its composer would not have known it. But when they came to the sentimental love songs, “in mournful measures long drawn out,” the effect was depressing and irritating in the extreme. Even Bouncer felt it, and would uplift his head, shut his eyes, and give vent to a series of lugubrious howls, as though he heard some canine friend in distress and was forthwith ignominiously hunted from the room. Stella, who was the *prima donna* of the party, attributed Clarice’s want of enthusiasm to a feeling something akin to jealousy, and was flattered, and forgave her. Thus the intimacy, such as it was, continued to flow

on in the usual conventional fashion, and was a part of the social life at Penally.

Mr. Fleming now paid frequent visits to Mr. Laurence—scarcely a day passed that there were not long interviews between the two ; and as Mr. Fleming never attempted to pay his respects to the ladies, they labelled his visits “official.” But when Mr. Laurence took to paying similar visits to the Manor House, and remained sometimes till far into the night, the family curiosity was roused, especially as he seemed more thoughtful and abstracted than usual.

“What can be the matter with Papa ?” exclaimed Stella, one morning as she and her mother sat *tête-à-tête*.

“I’m sure I can’t tell, my dear,” she answered ; “something disturbs him very seriously. He can’t sleep at night, and all the years we’ve been married I’ve never

known a client's case interfere with his digestion before, and I don't understand it now."

"There's something very strange and mysterious in this case, I'm sure," rejoined Stella; "I'm certain of that. I wonder if it has anything to do with that man who was hurt in the railway accident. You know they kept things so close, and smuggled him out of the way in such a suspicious manner; and Clarice being sent to the Parkes's, so that she should know nothing of what was going on, looks suspicious, to say the least of it."

"Why, my dear child," rejoined Mrs. Laurence, in her jolly fat voice, "you don't suppose they're hatching another gunpowder plot! I'm sure there is no harm anywhere, or your father wouldn't be mixed up in it—he's far too shrewd and hard-headed for that."

“The hardest heads get cracked sometimes, Mamma.”

“Yes, if they run against a brick wall,” answered mamma; “but your father’s not one of that sort: he always looks where he is going to—you never catch him with his weather eye shut. Of course these wakeful nights are very unpleasant, very trying, and however strong I make his night-cap it has no effect; he might as well go to bed on toast and water.”

“I’m very fond of Clarice,” said Stella, “and Mr. Fleming is a dear old man—but I hate mystery.”

“I wouldn’t be too curious, my dear,” replied Mrs. Laurence; “perhaps they have a large amount of dirty linen to wash, and your father’s helping them to do it in private. Quite right too; I hate the idea of dragging one’s private affairs before the public. But I do think he might let us into

the secret ; it isn't as if they were strangers, for they are friends of ours as well as clients of his."

" Yes," said Stella, in an aggrieved tone, " it is very hard to be shut out of everything ; I'm determined to find things out. I'll just ask papa straight out, and if he won't tell me, I'll worry him till he does."

" You had better be careful, Stella ; your father doesn't allow any interference in his business affairs. He's like a snapping turtle if *I* ask a simple question ; he bites my head off."

After a general consultation it was decided that Stella, who was the family favourite, and the special pet of her father, was to move to the attack—which she did on the first opportunity. There was no skirmishing, no beating about the bush, where Stella was concerned. She aimed straight at the mark.

“ You’re always going to Manor House, Papa,” coming down upon him as he was starting for his daily expedition, “ or else the Manor House comes here. I’m sure there’s something interesting going on, and you know more about it than anybody else.”

“ Naturally, my dear child, a lawyer must be in the confidence of his client—it is a positive necessity; but such confidence does not become a family possession, you know. It is business.”

“ We don’t care a fig for the business,” said Stella; “ it is the family ghost we want to make the acquaintance of. It is a shame to keep things so close, Papa, when we’re all dying of curiosity, and can’t get so much as a crumb to keep us from starving.”

“ Abstinence from unwholesome food is good for the mind as well as for the body, my Stella, and I’m not sure that absolute starvation is not better still. No, no !”

he added, as she became more demonstrative in her endeavours to force him to speak; “don’t come the modern Delilah over me, and try to shave your old father’s conscience instead of his head. Clergymen, doctors, and lawyers, are in honour bound to keep the secrets of their penitents, patients, and clients.”

He was proof against all her blandishments; she could wheedle nothing more out of him—except an aggravating smile. He locked his client’s secrets in his own heart and kept the key. If people will only trust to time, it is wonderful what revelations time will make if it is only let alone, and allowed to work in its own silent, inexorable way. No human effort can either retard or hasten its progress. While we are looking in despair on complications, knotty points, and perplexing circumstances, Time slowly turns his wheel, and lo! the tangled skein is

all unravelled, and all who run may read the things that have so perplexed us.

One bright morning, about a month after Hugh's departure, Clarice stood at the dining-room window reading one of those delightful epistles that never failed to arrive every morning—a kind of spiritual banquet off which she feasted before she began the day. There was a smile hovering about her perfect lips, and a soft love-light shining in her eyes, as she looked dreamily out upon the landscape, lovelier now than in its gorgeous summer dress, for the autumn tints of variegated greens and browns and gold were flung broadcast over the land, a soft purple haze hung over the distant hills, and the living sea lay hushed and grey in the still morning air.

“At your usual devotions, my child,” exclaimed Mr. Fleming, coming into the room in his serene elderly fashion. “Come,

if you let my coffee get cold I shall confiscate that precious piece of property on the spot!"

Clarice obeyed his summons, and, after the usual loving greeting, took her place at the breakfast-table and gave him such scraps of gossip as she considered public property. While they were still enjoying their little chit-chat, progressing slowly through their sociable meal, the door was flung open, and Jack hurried—no, not hurried, Jack never hurried—strode into the room. He looked haggard and tired, and perhaps a little graver and sterner than usual, and a trifle agitated for him.

"Jack! my dear boy!" exclaimed Mr. Fleming, rising from the table with outstretched hand. Clarice rose, and instinctively, though he grasped his uncle's hand, his eyes met hers. Soul reads soul, perhaps, quickly, as eye reads eye. The blood re-

ceded from Clarice's cheek, the light faded from her eyes. She turned marble white even to the lips, and her fresh young voice sounded strange and hollow as she said—

“What is the matter, Jack? There is something wrong! and that something is about *me*.”

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN UNEXPECTED MOVE.

GO to your room, dear," said Jack, "I want a few words with my uncle; we will take you into the conference afterwards."

"There is no afterwards," said Clarice, with blanched, trembling lips. "I must hear all there is to hear now. Father, I may stay?"

"Yes," he answered. "What is it, Jack? Don't keep us in suspense."

"There's no time for suspense," said Jack; "he'll be here directly."

"He! Who?" inquired Mr. Fleming.

“Lemaire,” said Jack, shortly. “I luckily got scent of his movements. He took the mail-train from London last night —so did I; we travelled down together, at least by the same train. He has got a shabby official-looking man with him; he’s been a good deal about the Court of King’s Bench lately. They are walking, and quickly too. I took the fly, and as I passed the precious pair on the road he gave me a low mocking bow, and laughed derisively. He looks as though he meant business. I’m afraid he’s brewing a mess of hell-broth somewhere.”

“We’ll make him drink it, my boy, we’ll make him drink it!” said the old man, in a state of feverish excitement. “I’m glad you hurried on to give us warning. We’ll get our guns in position ready to receive him.”

Jack scowled, and for the first time in his

life seemed disposed to take a gloomy view of affairs.

“I don’t know on what ground he means to make his attack,” he said. “Windy wordy warfare is easily dealt with ; you may match cunning with cunning, strength with strength. But if once the law stretches out its arm and lifts its voice—well, there’s the rub !”

“We can shut our ears, be deaf and not hear its voice,” said Mr. Fleming ; “and as for its arm, it must stretch to a tolerable length if it means to reach *us*. Don’t look so scared, child,” he added—and his voice was almost harsh in its anxious, loving irritation ; it made his heart ache to see the face that had lately been like a rose blossoming with hope and joy, change with such startling suddenness till it looked like a white mask of terror—“there’s nothing you need be afraid of.”

“ You’ll hide me somewhere ! ” she exclaimed. “ You will not let him take me away *now* ! ”

“ No, no ! rest quite easy on that score, ” he answered, decidedly; and he, and Jack too, hastened to soothe and cheer her.

As they were talking there was a sharp ring at the bell.

“ There they are ! ” exclaimed Jack. “ You had better go to your room, Clarice, unless you wish to be present at the interview—though I don’t think you’d care about it.”

“ Ah, no ! ” she answered, “ I don’t want to see him. I’m afraid.”

“ Afraid ! ” echoed Jack, “ while *we* are with you ? ”

“ But don’t you know, ” she answered, in an awestruck voice, “ there are people who have a mysterious hidden power—they can kill our consciousness and make us do

things *against* our will ! I'm afraid of that," she added, shuddering spasmodically. " I'm afraid of what I can't see, always—always."

A servant entered and brought in M. Lemaire's card, supplemented by a request for an immediate interview.

" Show him into the drawing-room. I'll see him presently," was the message Mr. Fleming returned.

" Let me go first—let me go ! Jack, please see me safely to my room."

She glanced timidly round and behind her, and hurried away under faithful old Jack's escort. He returned in a few moments, and had a brief conversation with his uncle before M. Lemaire was admitted.

" We must act very warily here," he said in conclusion, " and temporize, and try and gain *time*—time is necessary for us. And don't oppose the villain too violently."

“There is no scope for temporizing, Jack,” said the old man, mournfully—for he thought he had washed his hands of Lemaire for a time. “He is fighting for the custody of my child—his child. God knows what he would do with her; and I am determined, let what may come, that he shall never have her. I have the right on my side.”

“Not in the world’s eyes, my dear Uncle,” exclaimed Jack, who always looked with unprejudiced eyes on both sides of a question; no matter how strongly his own interest and sympathy were enlisted, he stood outside himself and regarded the other fairly. “Morally, we know, and if things could be clearly seen as they *are*, all the world would acknowledge that you have *all* the right; but the law can only recognize things that can be *proved*. *Moral* right is often *legal* wrong. He would pose as an outraged father—a touching position, sure

to appeal to public sympathy. You would appear as—what? as the illegal husband of *his* wife; as the man who detains his child in order to secure her and her wealth for your own disreputable, dissipated nephew—that is the unflattering term they'd apply to me. My dear Uncle, forgive my plain speaking, but we must speak of things as they would be presented to the world's eyes, not as they really *are* in *ours*, in God's eyes, and the eyes of truth and justice. Take my advice, and, whatever happens, be cool and courteous; it won't do to speak out your thoughts and intentions too plainly. I'm afraid he comes with the trump card in his hands."

"Good play will sometimes hold its own against trumps; but we shall see," said Mr. Fleming, as he rang the bell and desired that the two gentlemen should be shown into the room. And then speedily entered

M. Lemaire, looking the picture of elderly amiability. He was followed by a man dressed in a seedy suit of black, with a rather red, wrinkled, expressionless face, a forehead like a cannon ball, with a scanty fringe of red hair and sharp, deep-set eyes, like lights twinkling at the end of a tunnel. M. Lemaire glanced from Mr. Fleming to Jack, and bowed with smiling affability; neither spoke, but stiffly returned his silent salutation. He was driven to speak first.

“I have to apologize—he! he!—for my intrusion,” he said; “and doubly so for intruding my friend, Mr. Plummer, upon you. But as he represents my legal adviser, I desire him to be a witness to whatever passes between us.”

“Pray don’t apologize for your legal adviser’s presence,” rejoined Mr. Fleming, inclining his head courteously; “he is welcome.”

“ Glad to hear you say so, I’m sure. I was afraid you might consider us a little *de trop*,” answered M. Lemaire, laughing uneasily.

Mr. Fleming remained stern and silent, resolved to say as little as possible, but leave the chief part of the talking to the other side.

“ Perhaps it would be as well if you could tell us, as briefly as possible, the business that brought you here,” said Jack, striking the point promptly.

“ Ay, to be sure, young man,” replied M. Lemaire, with a condescending, impertinent stare that made Jack’s fingers itch to knock him down. “ I am sorry to be obliged to mix business up with the affections, but I am driven to do it. I have already appealed to you for my rights as a father—you refuse me with insults and recriminations; it is not in human nature to

endure too much or too long. I have always been a friend to you, Mr. Fleming. Remember, I spared you when I could have instituted criminal proceedings against you and yours ! ” he added, with suppressed ferocity.

“ To the case in point, sir—keep to that and nothing else,” said Mr. Fleming, with cool dignity, determined not to be irritated into the utterance of a hasty, ill-considered word.

“ I am quite willing to keep to the case in point,” said M. Lemaire. “ If I hesitate, it is only from considerations for your feelings.”

“ Please to leave my feelings out of the question, and proceed with your business,” replied Mr. Fleming.

“ First, then, I demand a private interview with my daughter, whose feelings, I have every reason to believe, have been

tampered with, and her innocence misled, by the fraudulent misrepresentations you and that scheming scoundrel there——”

“No flights of imagination, please!” exclaimed Jack, in his strong, clear voice, “and no irrelevant reference to me. I am not a patient man, and rather apt to resent an insult quickly. Stick to facts, and let us know precisely why you have favoured us with this visit.”

“I have already said that I first desire a private interview with my daughter, with no counteracting influence between us,” replied Lemaire.

“I am sorry that that is precisely the one thing in which I cannot oblige you,” answered Mr. Fleming, courteously. “Clarice heard of your arrival, and at once retired to her room. She declines to receive you.”

“By your advice!” exclaimed M. Lemaire, furiously.

“No, by her own will. Purity has an instinctive shrinking from contact with evil things,” rejoined Mr. Fleming.

“We shall see! Plummer, hand Mr. Fleming the writ of *Habeas Corpus*! You are prepared to stand against *me*, but can you stand against *that*? ” he added, triumphantly, as Plummer placed the writ of *Habeas Corpus* in the old man’s hand.

Jack emitted a sound from between his lips like the suppressed whistle of a steam-engine; but Mr. Fleming made no outward sign of any inward tribulation. He leisurely wiped his spectacles, put them on, and proceeded to read the formidable document through; then he bent his head slightly as he said—

“Yes, this seems to be correct enough, so far as I can judge. I am sorry you have thought it necessary to carry things to this

extent. I presume you do not wish to take any immediate action in this matter?"

" Dispatch is the soul of business," misquoted M. Lemaire, roughly; " and when a thing has got to be done, it is as well to do it and get it over—saves trouble, too, on both sides. I'd advise you to send for Clarice, and acquaint her at once with the actual state of affairs."

" For God's sake, no!" exclaimed Mr. Fleming, moved against his will. " Give us a little time for preparation; it is necessary both for her and me."

" You refuse, then, to comply with the order of the court?" said M. Lemaire.

" No, I do not refuse," he answered; and, in spite of his efforts to control himself, it was evident he suffered. " I only ask for a little time. *You* can be in no hurry to receive the child you have been content to abandon all her life! To me she has been

as my own child always. I am an old man, and to take her from me is like tearing my heart out. I must have time."

M. Lemaire looked exultant. He had laid his hand upon the vulnerable spot, and was able to strike home at last. The man who all his life had kept on a high-level plain so far above him, whose bitter scorn had bitten him to the bone, was at his mercy now! He held him in his grip, and would drain his heart's blood if he could. Still, he wanted to keep up appearances; he did not desire to seem hard or merciless. He glanced at Mr. Plummer as though for a suggestion.

"It is natural that the gentleman should desire a little time for consideration," returned Mr. Plummer, answering the mute appeal.

"At the end of the week," said Mr. Fleming, "I will give you my decision,

either complying or refusing to comply with this demand."

"A week—hum ! Well, I'm willing to agree to that," said M. Lemaire, magnanimously, "only I have one stipulation to make, and that is that there shall be no tricks played—no more philandering between your precious nephew there and my child."

"You cur," muttered Jack, half rising, "I could——"

"Ay," interrupted M. Lemaire, with a peculiarly irritating intonation of voice, "I dare say you *could* ; but you'd better not—it would only complicate matters, and I think you'll have work enough to do without that."

Mr. Fleming was anxious to bring the interview to a close. All was said that need be said, and he did not wish any skirmishing to take place between Jack and

M. Lemaire, who he knew would be only too glad if he could tempt the younger man to an ill-considered word or act that might be twisted into a breach of the peace; and Jack's temper, especially just now, was not warranted to keep under the stress of any heavy temptation. He therefore made it very evident to his unwelcome visitors that, the business being ended, he should feel obliged by their speedy departure. They took the hint, and prepared to depart accordingly. M. Lemaire added a finishing touch in his few last words—

“ It is not worth while for me to return to London until I can take my dear girl with me. I shall therefore remain in Penally until the week you have asked for is up; and as it is rather dull for an unoccupied stranger, perhaps you would not object to my amusing myself by sketching this deliciously picturesque old mansion ? ”

“ Outside my gates, sir, you can do as you please; but I warn you against trespassing within them,” answered Mr. Fleming, with uncompromising sternness.

So M. Lemaire departed, leaving Mr. Fleming and Jack, in spite of their calm seeming, half paralyzed by his unexpected move. They looked in each other’s faces for a moment in troubled silence, as though each was considering what word of hope or comfort he could give to the other. The old man looked as though he was so stunned by grief and surprise as to be hardly able to think or speak at all.

“ Well!” exclaimed Jack, at last, “ they are trying to bring things to a crisis with a vengeance! But don’t be cast down, Uncle. ‘ Never say die’ —that’s my motto; and we may foil them yet, but we must do nothing in a hurry.”

“ No; we must do nothing in a hurry,”

said Mr Fleming, echoing the words reflectively, though they seemed to have no meaning to his ears. “But,” he added—and a strange, resolute look came into his eyes—“one thing I am determined on, he shall never take my poor darling from me! No power on earth shall force me to give her up to *him*! I would as soon submit her to slow torture by fire and sword as to him! He would keep her gentle spirit on the rack, and play upon her shattered nerves with the cruelty of a fiend, till she died of terror, and his greedy hand would grasp at all he covets above her grave.”

“Don’t give way to those ideas,” said Jack, cheerfully; “pull yourself together and face things bravely—they might be worse.”

“Things are never so bad but they *might* be worse,” said the old man, irritably. “Instead of being hanged, one *might* be

drawn and quartered ; but that is no comfort to him when the rope is round his neck.”

“ Well, at any rate make up your mind to one thing,” said Jack; “ *we won’t give in* —though I can’t quite see a way through the difficulty as yet. My thoughts are thrown into such a state of confusion that I’ve got no head to speak of at present.”

“ I never thought he would dare to appeal to the law,” observed Mr. Fleming.

“ We generally reckon without our host in these cases,” said Jack. “ I dare say he discovered that he is only amenable to the French law, and *not* to the law of England, for his little peccadilloes. That would simplify matters for him considerably.”

“ I must see Laurence at once, Jack. We can take no step, decide on nothing, till I have consulted him. I don’t quite take in the legal aspect of this affair. He’s as

cunning as a weasel ; perhaps he'll find some loophole for us to wriggle out of. Have the dog-cart round, and we'll be off at once."

" Not quite in such a hurry," said Jack. " You must first see Clarice, and tell her, so much as you think prudent, of the result of the interview. Don't tell her the worst you fear—‘ Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof’—only tell her to keep in the house ; she must not go out without my escort or yours."

" And we were so happy, so full of hope this morning, my child and I," murmured the old man, only half aloud. " There is something I should like to tell you, Jack," he added, after a momentary pause ; " but I don't know whether Clarice would like it. Sooner or later you must know it, and I can't conceive her motive for concealing it from you now."

Jack mentally pricked up his ears, but he only said—

“ You can’t measure motives by the rule of three. You might as well try to weigh the sunlight with a pair of butcher’s scales. However, if she doesn’t want me to know her secret, *I* don’t want to hear. I’d as soon pick a pocket as steal a woman’s secret against her will.”

Mr. Fleming kept silence. “ Perhaps, after all,” he thought, “ it would be best to leave it to Clarice to tell him herself, in her own way.”

CHAPTER XXV.

IN A FOG.

LAWYER and client sat alone in the official sanctum of the latter, surrounded by all the silent paraphernalia of the law: ponderous volumes imprisoning the brain-work of centuries—the thoughts, opinions, and judgments of men whose lights have long since gone out, but whose labours still stand as beacon-lights to guide the stumbling steps of their followers through the labyrinths of the law, the narrow, crooked ways, to where Justice stands, with blinded eyes, holding her scales

even. Sometimes they miss the road, for the legal sign-post cannot be fixed so straight and square as to be plain to the eyes of all men: they are apt to misread the directions, and twist and turn, in and out and round about, till they are lost in a maze of doubts and queries; and when they have wrangled their way through their manifold difficulties, they reach the feet of Justice in a bespattered, bedraggled condition, too befogged and blinded to recognize her.

Well, beside these ancient volumes there were nests of pigeon-holes overflowing with dusty papers, and piles of official documents labelled and tied with pink tape; letters, pamphlets, and scraps of all kinds were scattered about—a very chaos of disorder it seemed to strangers' eyes, but to the master it had an order of its own—he could dive down and pick up exactly what he wanted

from anywhere. In the midst of them all Mr. Laurence was seated, like a gnome in the midst of his mysteries. On the opposite side of the table sat Mr. Fleming. They had talked for a long time; he had gone over his grievance again and again, and painted his fears and the pitfalls that beset him in the darkest colours. Mr. Laurence sat with bent brows; he sympathized deeply with the feelings of his client. But he had no dealings with the emotions—they were outside matters; he must regard things from a legal point of view, and concentrate his thoughts on that only. A lawyer must never let his heart run away with his head. He had been quietly gathering the facts of the case (in a social, friendly kind of way they had talked matters over before, but now things were serious, and came before him in the way of business), and put them in his mental digester; and when he had

separated the chaff from the grain, he gave Mr. Fleming the result of his cogitations.

“ The case is encompassed with difficulties on both sides—that is, if you carry out your design. You may try—but, frankly, I fear you will fail.”

“ You can surely advise me on some course ? ” said Mr. Fleming.

“ The simplest course to pursue, and the only one I can conscientiously advise, is to obey the law,” replied Mr. Laurence.

“ And give up my child ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Impossible ! I will not do it ! ” he rejoined, decidedly.

“ Are you sure that your fears on *her* account are not exaggerated ? ” suggested Mr. Laurence, who had always thought his client was rather a monomaniac on this subject.

“ Quite sure,” replied Mr. Fleming, wav-

ing his hand impatiently, intimating that there was nothing more to be said about *that*. “Is there no way of my being allowed to retain her by paying a fine?—I don’t care how heavy.”

“A fine is quite out of the question. The legal Cerberus is not to be lured from his post by that kind of sop in the pan. My dear friend, it is best you should understand things quite plainly: you have not a leg to stand upon—the bad man here shows the better cause. It is often so. If you refuse to obey this writ of *Habeas Corpus*, it will be necessary for you to appear before the court, and show good cause for your refusal.”

“I will do neither one thing nor the other,” replied Mr. Fleming, obstinately. “I will not parade our private family sorrows for the pleasure of the public. To show cause why I refuse, I must dig up a dead scandal, galvanize, and make it live,

with all its miserable details, in the world's eyes; submit to have my good name, *her* good name, mauled and mangled in open court—my very heart dragged out and vivisected before my very eyes ! And Clarice—why the publicity, the shame of it would kill her ! for we who are most innocent would *seem* most guilty. I know that. Well, if I refuse to do either of these things, what follows ? ”

“ Why, if you refuse to comply with the order of the law, you will be committed for contempt of court,” answered Mr. Laurence.

“ And that means ? ” said Mr. Fleming, interrogatively.

“ Committal to jail,” replied Mr. Laurence ; “ and your committal to jail brings about precisely that which you are anxious to avoid. *You* being out of the way, *she* would naturally fall into M. Lemaire's hands—there is nothing to prevent it, unless

you could manage to conceal her in some place of security. And that, I think, is beyond your power; *he* being once on your track will keep to it with the tenacity of a bulldog."

"Is there no alternative?"

"None that I can see," replied Mr. Laurence. "There are no intricate points for discussion; it is all plain sailing."

"And you have no comforting advice to give me?" pleaded Mr. Fleming.

"I wish I had," said Mr. Laurence, heartily. "If I thought there was a chance of success I would gladly take up the cudgels and fight your battles, but I cannot strike for certain failure. The only weapon that might win your cause, you will not have handled. Under these circumstances, the only advice that I can conscientiously give is that you submit to what the law requires of you."

Mr. Fleming rose up with a heavy sigh.

“ Well, if that is the view you take of the matter——” he began.

“ It is the only practical view that can be honestly taken,” interrupted Mr. Laurence, “ and I do not care to feed you with false hopes.”

“ Then since the law cannot help me, I must look round and try and help myself. I don’t feel as if I had got quite to the end of my resources yet; but we shall see. Dine with us to-night, will you? My affairs are in such a tangled state I want them set right; and, even, I may have something more to tell you when night comes.”

Slowly, and buried in deep reflection, Mr. Fleming went on his way homeward. He who as a rule was so keenly alive to the beauties of nature, was blind and deaf to her attractions now; she seemed so hard, cold, and unsympathetic with his mood to-day.

The birds were twittering and hopping about as blithe as ever, and overhead the great sun was shining, filtering his bright rays through the autumn-tinted trees, and dancing in golden shadows at his feet ; the sea was creeping inland, with rippling, stealthy murmurs, and the fresh sun-laden air seemed to come straight down from heaven, so sweet and pure it was ! But the profound calm and beauty of the outer world jarred upon his troubled spirit. It is a mistake to say that nature sympathizes with our moods—she does nothing of the kind. When we are sick and sorrowful, our hearts torn and distracted by those manifold agonies which mar this life of ours, the face of nature in her serene, beautiful calm, far from soothing or calming, irritates and makes us mad, the contrast between her irresponsive loveliness and our stormy griefs is so great.

Arrived at the Manor House, Mr. Fleming found Jack pacing to and fro on the terrace walk, impatiently awaiting him. Having left his uncle at Mr. Laurence's office, Jack had strolled through the village on the look-out for any scraps of information he might be able to pick up respecting M. Lemaire's movements. He appeared to have taken up his abode at the little inn there, "The Puss in Boots," the solitary house of entertainment the place afforded. This much he learned from Ben, who, through Mr. Fleming's good offices, had got employment there, had given up poaching, and seemed on the road to his ancient respectability.

"I've seen this gent afore," said Ben, confidentially. "It was him that was hurt in the accident, and took up to the Manor House to be nussed. I know'd him again, though he was covered wi' blood then. But I wasn't at 'Tel Kebber' for nothing;

I'm used to looking at a man's face through a mask of gore."

"Well, Ben," answered Jack, "I hope you'll find him a profitable visitor; it isn't often a man of his kind comes here for entertainment."

"He don't always get what he comes for," grinned Ben, "and sometimes he gets a sight more. This un's too fond of asking questions — not as I care about that, so long as I has the answering on 'em!" and Ben chuckled as though he were choking over a capital joke, and winked so violently as though he was trying to wink his eyelids off.

Jack had the faculty of getting information without the trouble of asking questions. By a few adroit observations he managed to learn all he desired to know, and he very soon knew all that Ben had got to tell; it wasn't much on this occasion.

“He’s going up to the Rectory this afternoon,” said Ben : “he says it’s a Christian’s duty ; and t’other one’s going to London by the afternoon train, but he’s coming back at the end of the week.”

The following Tuesday was the limit of the time allowed to Mr. Fleming for consideration.

“Now I’ve told you my news,” said Jack, “just empty your budget. What says the legal light of Penally ? ”

Although he spoke lightly, he was evidently anxious and ill at ease. He listened in attentive silence, never once interrupting by a question or remark, while Mr. Fleming gave him a verbatim account of his interview with Mr. Laurence and its result.

“So you see, Jack,” he added, in conclusion, “we can expect no help from the *law*. Everything there is dead against us. Something must be done ; but what *can* be done ?

Think, Jack ; you have more wit than I, for whichever way I turn, it seems I am running my head against a brick wall."

" And at the present moment that same brick wall seems to encompass my senses too," rejoined Jack. " It certainly is a gloomy look-out at present. But don't lose heart, Uncle ; never give up the game till you are fairly beaten out of the field, and, like Samson, are shorn of the last lock of your strength. I have faith in Providence, and believe that in the eleventh hour some Divine inspiration will come to us."

" Divine inspiration cannot divert the law from its course," replied the old man, testily, " and this Christian Shylock will have his pound of flesh."

" But not one drop of blood," answered Jack, quoting Portia's words almost unconsciously.

" Blood !" echoed a voice that made them

both start, as Clarice, white as a sheet, glided in between them. “Why are you talking of blood? is anybody killed? Blood! I used to dream of it once; blood red—red everywhere! But why do you talk of of it now,” she added, raising her voice, “when I had almost forgotten?”

“Don’t look so scared, Clary dear,” Jack answered, cheerfully; “it was only a quotation from Shakespeare, nothing more.”

“And *you* can quote Shakespeare to-day!” exclaimed Clarice. “Nero fiddled when Rome was burning, and you—quote Shakespeare when our hearts are all on fire! Oh, Jack! you never think—you never care.”

Her scathing look and tone of reproach hurt him to the quick, and sent the colour flying into his face. It was hard to be misjudged, and by her. He said no word in self-justification—it was his life-long habit

to be patient with Clarice ; and she glanced from him to Mr. Fleming, saying—

“ You have been to Mr. Laurence, father ? Well, what does he say ? Don’t keep me in the dark. I’m stronger now ; tell me the worst.”

“ There is nothing settled, my dear child,” he answered, with an appearance of content he was far from feeling, determined to fight off all anxiety as far as possible from her, that his own forebodings should not darken her mind, until—well, if they were realized that would be time enough ; no need for her to taste the bitter anticipation of evil—enough when the evil came. “ I hope there will be no worst,” he added ; “ under good management things may be brought to a satisfactory conclusion. You know we have six days for deliberation.”

She did not know at the end of that six days what the alternative would be. They had not told her that.

“ Six days,” she echoed, dreamily. “ Yes ; many things may happen in six days.”

“ Don’t you trouble about that,” exclaimed Jack, cheerfully. “ You know we have both taken an oar in that boat, and never fear but we shall pull straight. It is no use to trouble you with all the ins and outs of business. When it is all rolled out straight and smooth, it will be quite time enough for you to take a bird’s-eye view. Now come and take a turn in the garden ; you are as white as a snowdrop. Nothing like fresh air as a cure for pale cheeks.”

Clarice crossed swiftly to Mr. Fleming’s side, laid her hand upon his arm, and looked inquiringly in his face, as she said—

“ Does he know ? Have you told him about—Hugh ? ”

“ No,” he answered next, for it was evident that the memory of Hugh had deadened her to the sense of her own peril,

“I’ll come, Jack,” she said. “I want to talk to you.”

She and Jack passed out into the garden. Mr. Fleming watched them curiously as they paced to and fro. He knew well enough what it was she wanted to talk to Jack about, and half regretted that he had not in some way prepared him for the communication. He was sorry for his boy, and wondered how he would take it. Meanwhile Clarice told her simple love-story in the simplest fashion. She took no round-about way, but went straight to the point, which was the best way in dealing with one of Jack’s nature. At first she felt some little embarrassment in speaking of the man *she* loved to the *man* who loved her. She feared, too, that Jack would be hot and angry; and a harsh word from him just now would have fallen upon her like a blow. But Jack was generous, and made the task

easy. Whatever he felt, he made no sign, but paced up and down by her side with closed lips and eyes cast down. In his supreme tenderness for *her*, he forgot himself. Seeing how silent he was, she kept silent herself for a time, waiting for him to speak. Presently she said—

“Won’t you speak to me, Jack? Do say something, please. Are you angry?”

He raised his head then, and his eyes met hers with such a kindly gaze her fears took flight.

“Angry!”—he echoed her last word—“because another man is luckier than I? No; but of course—I—feel—” He kept back the strong man’s sigh that struggled to get loose; but he would not pain her with the sight of his pain. He added, with a ghastly kind of smile, “And I can’t say much in the way of congratulation yet. I shall presently; for the moment I am rather taken by surprise.”

“I am glad you take it so, Jack; I wanted to know, and yet I was afraid to tell you.”

“I am sorry you should ever feel afraid to tell me anything,” said Jack. “Don’t you know that when we love people we think more of their happiness than our own? It is a poor love that thinks only of self.”

“You are a good man,” said Clarice, emphatically—“better than I thought; and you’ll be friends with Hugh?”

“I hope so, certainly, by and by,” answered Jack; “but I am only human, and when a fellow is thirsty, and sees another man drain the cup he has been reaching for all his life—well, you can’t expect him to grasp the hand of good-fellowship over it. You might as well ask a fellow to dance at his own funeral! It will be all right by and by. I dare say we shall love

one another like brothers," he added, grimly; "but we've got some stormy waters to pull through first."

"Jack, Jack!" exclaimed Mr. Fleming, calling from the study window in excited tones, "I've got an idea!"

"Hold it fast till I come!" answered Jack, as, with a few apologetic words to Clarice, he strode across the lawn. "Now for the idea, Uncle. What is it worth?"

"Everything!" he answered, looking eagerly in Jack's face. Where's the *Firefly*?"

"She lies at Plymouth at present. Why?"

"Is she ready for a cruise?"

"Not exactly." A sudden light seemed to break upon him as he added, "I see what you're driving at. You want to take Clarice for a long cruise out of the way of everything and everybody. A splendid

idea ! I wonder we never thought of it before."

" How long before you can bring her round ready for sea ?" exclaimed Mr. Fleming, feverishly excited.

" If I put on pressure," answered Jack, reflectively, " three or four days might manage it. I'll telegraph to my skipper at once, and start myself by the first train to superintend, and hurry things on."

" Is she good for a long cruise ?" inquired Mr. Fleming, anxiously.

" She's good for anything but the Polar Seas," he answered. " We must hurry up for the present, and provision her as well as we can. We can take in stores on our way to—wherever you want to go."

So once more in the game of human life, human endeavour sat down to play against fate.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MR. FLEMING SEES HIS WAY.

DURING the next few days Mr. Fleming was very much occupied in arranging his affairs. There was so much to be done, so much to be thought of. He was harassed and troubled about many things. Quite apart from the legal transactions, as things now stood with Clarice they necessitated a complete change in the disposition of his property. Hoping almost against hope until now that the hope was virtually dead and buried, he had looked for the fulfilment, even in the distant future, of his darling

scheme, and had settled the whole of his property, over which he had supreme control, on Jack and Clarice jointly. But her wilful affections having gone so entirely in an opposite direction, rendered the old will worthless ; things had to be reconsidered, and a new will made wherein each would be equally benefited, but benefited separately. Mr. Laurence was closeted with him many hours of every day.

Besides the important legal business under consideration, the household and domestic concerns demanded careful thought in their arrangement. He intended to go for a long cruise, and consequently to be absent for an indefinite time. The Manor House was to be left in charge of his confidential servant, Hans Hausmann, and things were to go on as usual, the house being always kept in readiness for their return at a few hours' notice. He did not

take the household into his confidence respecting his movements, but left them in a state of vague uncertainty, with the exception of Katrina; she, and she only, knew the exact state of affairs, and it was decided that she was to accompany them on their cruise—for Katrina was a necessity to Clarice. Mr. Laurence, who had Mr. Fleming's entire and perfect confidence, was to be left in charge of all financial arrangements, and act as general agent or vicegerent, on whom devolved all authority during the absence of the family.

Clarice did not seem to take over-kindly to the idea of a long cruise; she said nothing to oppose it, but received the communication without comment or remark. Of course the arrangements had to be made with the strictest privacy, for if the slightest suspicion of his contemplated movements should circulate through the village it would

no doubt reach M. Lemaire's ears, and utter failure and complete discomfiture would be the result. Mr. Fleming and Katrina were at work night and day, hurrying on the arrangements and making every preparation in order that they might embark as soon as the *Firefly* made her appearance.

It was now Friday, and Jack had written to say that he would have the yacht round some time on Saturday; and he proposed that they should come aboard at daybreak on Sunday, and sail forthwith. He reminded Clarice to have her favourite books, her music, and any knickknacks she liked to have about her, adding—

“For I hope we shall enjoy our ‘home upon the water’ for a few months, and we’ll have a sail among the beautiful ‘Greek Isles’ which you have so often longed to see.”

She was silent for a moment after reading

Jack's letter ; then looked very gravely in Mr. Fleming's face as she said—

“ Father dear, I don't seem to care so much for the Greek Isles now ; and I don't want to go for a long cruise at all. A trip for a few days would be pleasant enough, but—*months* ! And I don't see the necessity for all this fuss—sending my books and music aboard and all that ; it doesn't seem worth while.”

“ Clarice ! you surprise me when you talk like that ! ” exclaimed Mr. Fleming, absolutely bewildered. “ Why, you must have heard us talking over the matter, and preparing for the cruise for three days past.”

“ I haven't taken much notice, and I thought it was only for a short trip—indeed I don't think I've really thought of it at all. I *can't* go, father dear ! I—I've been writing to Hugh, and I've told him everything, because I think it is right that he should

know. I expect he will be here next week ; I have asked him to come."

Mr. Fleming regretted now that he had not followed Jack's advice and taken her into the fullest confidence from the first ; but while letting her know a part, he had kept her in ignorance of the whole truth, and of the most important part of it. Her inveiglement to London, and the events that followed it, had already given her a great shock (though she had carried herself bravely, and seemed to feel it less than she really did, lest her anxieties might heighten his trouble), and in order to spare her delicate organization from another and still more severe shock he had covered up the skeleton—tried to hide it from her sight ; and if he could only get her away from Penally, she might remain unconscious of the peril in which she had stood. If things came to the worst, and she were forced into

the position she had dreaded all her life, with a horror that had been born with her—well, they must abide by fate: he could see no farther—all beyond was a blank. But by getting her to sea, beyond the reach of the law, for the last year of her minority, he hoped to avoid the calamity he had fought against, by her mother's last desire, from the hour her mother had died.

It would be too hard, too terrible, to fail *now* that they were fast nearing the end of their perplexities. If she were only of age—once her own mistress, in possession of her inheritance, beyond the reach of M. Lemaire's clutches—well, they might punish *him* for evading the law in any way they pleased. For himself he cared not a fig—it was only of *her* he thought, for *her* he cared at all. Now she seemed to oppose the only plan that would save her! But, “Poor child, she does not know!” he thought, as

he gazed with compassionate affection on her face. But she must be told ; the time had come when it was imperative she should know precisely the strait in which she stood—there was no question about that. If she were left in ignorance she might checkmate them—miss all by a single move at the last moment ! He spoke to her very gently, very tenderly.

“ My darling child,” he said, “ you know how it pains me to cross the slightest wish of yours, and there is no time to argue or discuss the subject. You *must* go on this protracted cruise ; it is the only means of saving you from *him*. My darling, listen : so long as I had only Lemaire to fight against, I was strong enough for the battle ; but he has done what I never thought he would have dared to do—he has called in the aid of the law, and the law demands that I give you into his keeping, or appear

at the bar and show good cause why I refuse to do so ! ”

“ But you will not give me up ! —you will not ? ” she gasped, in terror.

“ By God’s help, no ! ” he answered, emphatically.

“ Then, while I have you and Jack, what is there to fear ? ” she inquired, somewhat reassured. “ I know he came the other day, and you had a long interview with him and sent him away ! ”

“ Ay, but—he has not gone,” replied Mr. Fleming, giving her the information regretfully, and getting over the ground as quickly as he could. “ He is still in the village—waiting—do you understand, darling ? —waiting the week that he has given me for consideration. Then, if I still refuse, they have the right to arrest *me* and put me in jail for contempt of court ! And you →alone in the world, what would become

of you?—what? You must fall into his hands—*there is no help for it!* But, for God's sake, don't look so scared! Clarice! Clarice! don't be afraid—keep up your courage—get your things together—we sail on Sunday at daybreak—only follow my advice—keep calm—be mistress of yourself—and once at sea—with me and Jack—you will be safe—safe!"

She answered nothing, made no comment, no remark, only stared at him with wide-open eyes void of all expression, and a white face that looked like a mask of marble. He shook her gently by the shoulder, adding—

"Clarice, child, rouse yourself! You must not give way and lose your grip at this the eleventh hour. Think, you have only another day to wait, and all will be well!"

A moment's pause, then she came close to him, laid her hand upon his arm, looked

with concentrated, eager anxiety in his face as she said, in a curdling whisper—

“ Will they come in the night, do you think, and take me away while the house is quiet and everybody is asleep? They may be hiding somewhere now! ”

She clung to him shuddering, and glanced furtively round with a strange, fitful light in her eyes.

“ Tut, tut, my child,” he answered, soothingly, as he stroked her golden hair, “ there’s no fear of force or violence being used. If they claim you at all, it will be with all formality, and in the open day; but there is no cause for anxiety till *after Tuesday next*—so much grace they have given me. Only be patient and calm, and all will be well. The way is clear before us; we have nothing to fear if you will only be brave.”

“ I’ll try—yes, I’ll try,” she murmured, folding her hands helplessly together, with

the same strange light in her eyes. She glanced fearfully round as though she expected some terrible thing would spring out upon her. Half-stunned, half-paralyzed, she seemed outwardly—though within her very soul was torn and distracted, her every sense convulsively shaken. But she made no sigh; she only looked as though she had been frightened and frozen into a dead calm.

Mr. Fleming talked to her soothingly and cheerfully, and presently comforted himself with the idea that he sent her away calm and reasonable, having received his information more quietly and sensibly than he had hoped for. He had feared an outbreak of the old terrified excitement, only intensified by the present strait.

In the afternoon Mr. Laurence was there as usual, and, in the course of conversation, Mr. Fleming reproached himself for having

in one particular instance stood in the way of Clarice's interests.

"If I could only have foreseen how things would turn out," he said, "I would have yielded to Hugh Spencer's suggestion. He is a fine, bold young fellow, and proposed that he should get a special license and marry Clarice with the slightest possible delay."

"Don't reproach yourself on that score, my friend," exclaimed Mr. Laurence. "Young Spencer's idea couldn't have been carried out. *You* wouldn't commit perjury—and it is impossible that Miss Lemaire, being under age, could marry without her father's consent; so pray make your mind easy on that point."

On the next day Clarice did not appear at the breakfast-table. Katrina presented herself instead of her young mistress. Mr. Fleming at once saw that there was some-

thing wrong. The heart recognizes the presence of evil before the tongue has time to tell or the ears to hear it.

“What is it, Katrina?” he inquired, anxiously.

“Well, sir, I hardly know how to tell you,” she answered. “Miss Clarice has had one of her old attacks. I hoped she had outgrown them, for it is six years since she had the last.”

“Tell me precisely what has occurred,” said Mr. Fleming. “Come, sit down, Katrina; you are a sensible woman, I know, and don’t exaggerate things. Come, begin at the beginning.”

“Well, sir, she was very quiet all yesterday; I could not get her to talk at all. If I spoke she wouldn’t answer; she did not seem to hear me. She seemed nervous, restless, and uncomfortable, and before she went to bed insisted on my getting a light

and going over the house, and went peeping into places where she never thought of going before. She said nothing, only *seemed* suspicious ; I could not make it out. However, I got her to bed at last, and waited till she was asleep, when I went to bed myself ; but it must have been about two o'clock, I think, when I heard my door open very quietly. I started up, and a white figure came gliding into the room, with eyes wide open in a fixed stare. It was Miss Clarice, but not a bit like herself—she was like the ghost of her own poor, dear mother ! She stared at me as if she didn't know me, and passed her hand lightly over my face and muttered to herself—though I couldn't understand what she was muttering ; then she went out of the room. I followed her, and she went down to your study door ; there she stood a full minute listening, and fidgeted with the handle of the door, but

did not go in. Then she went back to her room, and laid down with her eyes still open and her lips moving. I sat down by her pillow very quietly so as not to startle her, and never left her for the rest of the night. She lay for a long time moaning and tossing uneasily. She is sleeping quietly now ; but I am worried, sir—I own I am very much worried about Miss Clarice."

"I do not think there is anything particularly alarming in the recurrence of this sleep-walking attack," began Mr. Fleming, who had listened to her attentively ; when she interrupted him, saying—

"If you had seen her face, sir ; if you had only seen her face ! It freezes me only to think of it. She looked like my poor lady in her last illness."

"Poor child ! poor child ! Of course she is suffering from severe mental disturbance just now," said Mr. Fleming, tenderly and

thoughtfully. "That is only natural considering the circumstances ; and I am not surprised it should take the old form—it will pass away, it will pass away ! You must have observed how greatly she has improved since—well, since this attachment between her and young Spencer ; and how calmly she has carried herself through these harassing excitements, which at one time would have brought on some terrible crisis. This sleep-walking recurrence that seems to make *you* anxious does not alarm *me* in the least. It is better that her troubled spirit should take that quiescent, though certainly not pleasant, form, than she should suffer from the old nerve-trouble, whether of the terrible excitement or depression, which we have so much reason to dread. No, I feel as though the sun was shining somewhere behind these clouds, Katrina, and all will be well with us—well with all of us—soon.

Tell me when Clarice wakes ; I will see her, and judge for myself."

So opened the morning of that most eventful day.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE LAST NIGHT.

A BOUT noon, much to Katrina's surprise and Mr. Fleming's satisfaction, Clarice awoke seemingly quite herself, arose, dressed and made her appearance at the luncheon-table with many apologies for being such a sluggard. "She could not tell how it was she had slept so long."

"Perhaps you had a bad night, my child?" the old man observed, greeting her with a fond caress, and anxious to learn if any idea, any dream-memory, lingered in her mind of the last night's doings.

“Not at all,” she answered; “and, a wonder for me, I have had quite a sound sleep all night. I don’t know when I have slept so soundly; though I don’t look like it—see these black circles round my eyes! And somehow I feel tired—so tired, as though I had been bruised and beaten.”

It was quite true; she looked unusually haggard and worn, as though she had kept an anxious vigil, rather than passed a night of deep slumber.

As the minutes and hours rolled on she paced aimlessly up and down the room, looking restlessly out of the window, manifested a feverish anxiety to get aboard the yacht, and kept inquiring every five minutes—

“Has the *Firefly* arrived yet, father dear?” Isn’t it late? Can anything have happened to it? Surely it ought to be here by this time—it is nearly three o’clock! ”

“Don’t worry yourself, dear child,” he answered, seeming far more content and at rest than he really felt. “I don’t expect it till quite late in the afternoon. Perhaps Jack may think it most prudent not to come into Penally till after dusk. Immediately they arrive Jack will come ashore and bring us the news himself. Meanwhile, have you got all your preparations made?”

She looked at him as though rather bewildered by the question.

“I!” she exclaimed. “No, I have done nothing, Katrina knows.”

“Ay, Katrina!” echoed the old man; “I don’t know what we should do without her. There are so many odds and ends to think of; and I don’t want there to be any confusion at the last moment. We must all rest well to-night, and be up at day-break, and start quietly while the rest of the world is sleeping. There, there, keep

quiet, child! there is nothing for you to be anxious about—nothing at all."

"Why, why will things be so contrary!" exclaimed. Clarice, as though struck by a sudden access of thought. "When, father dear, when shall I see Hugh—my Hugh, again? Ah, why did you send him away? If he were here! if he were only here he could save me from all this—I know he could!"

"My dear Clarice," replied Mr. Fleming, glancing at her in some surprise, "I have explained everything to you already. What could Hugh Spencer do for you? We are pursuing the only line of action that is open to us—doing the only thing that can be done with due regard to *your* safety. In every move we make we are thinking of you, and only of you. Can't you see that?"

She answered nothing, but resumed her restless, polar-bearish pacing to and fro in

the room. Presently she began laughing very softly to herself. She took no notice of anybody or of anything, as the servants came in and out about their business, and once or twice Katrina entered to make some inquiry of her young mistress.

Mr. Fleming was busily engaged looking over and generally destroying a mass of correspondence and miscellaneous collection of papers, which had been allowed to accumulate during the last few months. He glanced at Clarice a little impatiently once or twice ; at last he said—

“ Clarice, my child, can’t you sit still for a few minutes ? My nerves are rather unstrung, and you fidget me with that restless pacing to and fro.”

“ If you want me to sit still,” she answered, “ you must tie me down with ropes. I couldn’t possibly sit still else. I must march up and down, keeping time with

my own thoughts.” Then, acting in direct contradiction to her words, she stood suddenly still, laid her hand upon his shoulder, and looked straight into his eyes as she said, “Do you know, dad darling, such a strange thought strikes me. Suppose all this talk and fluster is only a *ruse*—a plan to separate me from Hugh ! ”

“My God ! ” exclaimed Mr. Fleming, staring at her as though for the moment he could scarcely take in the full meaning of her words. “Is it possible ! *you*, Clarice, the one care, the one object of my whole life’s devotion—*you* suspect *me* of false dealing ! treachery to *you* ! My God ! this is the cruellest blow of all ! Child, you have stung me to the heart ! ”

His pained accents, the grieved expression of his face, recalled her to herself. She flung her arms about his neck.

“Dad darling,” she exclaimed, “forgive

me! forgive me! I didn't mean it—how could I? The thought flashed through my brain and tripped off my tongue before I even knew it was there! I couldn't help it! but *I—I myself*—never thought such a thing! How could I—your own Clarice! when *I* know all you are—all you have always been to me!" She burst into a fit of hysterical weeping and half-incoherent self-reproaches, and grew so agitated, that he turned his thoughts from his own aggrieved feelings and used his best endeavours to calm her.

"There, there, my child," he said, fondling her golden head; "don't cry, don't be unhappy—I know you didn't mean it. I am sure of that—and—it only hurt me for a moment—it is all over now, and forgotten."

Although he spoke so reassuringly to her, and took great pains to reconcile her to herself, yet the mere fact that such a suspicion could even "flash through her

brain" hurt him more than he cared to confess, even to himself; but his chief object being to keep *her* free from excitement, and get her away quietly in the morning, he drifted away from the subject as quickly as possible, and tried to occupy her thoughts and her hands too in assisting him in his final arrangements. He sent her on expeditions to gather sundry trifles together from different parts of the house, and tie them up and label them as they were packed in boxes, ready to be sent for safe custody to his London solicitors.

About six o'clock Jack put in an appearance. He had brought the yacht round, and left it anchored in a lonely little cove about half a mile off, so that it might lie unobserved and out of sight of the village. They had been very much pressed for time, Jack said, but everything had been done to make the vessel comfortable so far as it was

possible ; but he suggested that Katrina should go down at once, carrying any little knick-knackeries with her to make Clarice's cabin comfortable, and ready for her to settle down in cosily in the morning. They could all rough it, and take their own time to make themselves comfortable. His only anxiety was for *her*. The more formidable part of the luggage was to be sent down under cover of the night.

“ May not I go down with Katrina ? ” asked Clarice ; “ I should like to very much. I want to get away from the house ; I want to sleep aboard the yacht to-night.”

“ I am afraid that is impossible, dear,” answered Jack ; “ things are all at sixes and sevens at present. Katrina will have hard work to get things ship-shape by the morning.”

“ I don’t care about things being at sixes at sevens,” urged Clarice ; “ I don’t care

about anything. I only long to get out of this house ; I don't want to sleep here another night."

" Why ? What fancy is this ? " said Jack, smiling good-naturedly.

" It is no fancy at all," answered Clarice, " and I can't tell you why ; if I did, you would only laugh, and I hate being laughed at. And—and I may go with Katrina ? Jack, dear old Jack, say I may go—for indeed I must, I *must* ! "

He framed her upturned face in his two hands, and looked with wistful tenderness on it as he said—

" I cannot bear to cross even a fancy of yours, Clarice, but what you ask is *impossible* ; the cabins are not yet in order, the men all busy. Your appearance so long before you are expected would throw everything out of gear. Besides, we want you at home to make our last evening in the old home cheerful ! "

However, there was not much time or opportunity for the exercise of “cheerful sociability.” Dr. Parkes paid them a long visit in the early evening, and Mr. Laurence dined there, and remained until quite late at night. Jack, too, was so occupied with his uncle and Mr. Laurence in the study—whither they retired immediately after dinner—that he had no time to bestow on Clarice. Jack had escorted and seen Katrina aboard the *Firefly* as soon as possible after his arrival. Clarice missed her sadly, and, being left to herself, wandered aimlessly about the house, that already began to assume a lonely, deserted look, dismantled as it was of its pretty household gods. Then she went into the drawing-room, and stepped out through the French windows on to the terraced walk outside, and then paced up and down, alone now, where she and Hugh had paced together on that

last evening when he had said “Good-bye.”

Now and again she passed by the study windows and looked in. It was a lovely starlit night, and, though the autumn was advancing with rapid strides, the windows were wide open, and the air blew in fresh and balmy from the sea. The three gentlemen were busily engaged—now bending with corrugated brows over various documents; then talking earnestly, pen in hand, as though discussing certain points. They were so much occupied that they took no notice of the white figure that now and again passed by the open window—they did not even seem to observe her. Once, as she sauntered slowly past, she caught the sound of her own name, coupled with that of Hugh Spencer, and Jack’s voice raised rather louder than usual, and as though in protest against some proposition of his uncle’s. For

a second she was half tempted to linger, but with natural delicacy she shrank from playing the eavesdropper, and, hurrying past, put herself in the way of temptation no more.

She returned to the drawing-room, sat down at the piano, and let her fingers wander idly over the keys. Without thought, without reflection, she played on—played without knowing what she was playing—no sonata, no regular set piece. She improvised as she went along, and drew forth a series of weird sounds, as though the ghosts of departed melodies were lingering within, revealing their haunting presence at the touch of a mistress hand.

Presently she commenced singing softly to herself—no regular, consecutive verse, but snatches of such music as she and Hugh had sung together during that brief happy time. She took no note of time, and did

not know how long she had been playing, when she heard the voice of Mr. Laurence as he crossed the hall, exchanging a few parting words as he left the house. In another moment Mr. Fleming came into the drawing-room.

“ My dear child,” he said, “ is it not almost time you went to bed? It is after ten o’clock, and you know you must be up at daybreak.”

She rose up obediently, and slowly closed the piano. As she did so she stooped down and kissed the ivory keys with her lips, whispering—

“ Good-bye. Keep all your music till I come back.”

“ Good-night, dad darling,” she added, as she lifted her face for the good-night kiss. “ I feel so strange, so drowsy—I shall be glad to get to bed. Kiss me again, dear, and say ‘ God bless you ! ’ ”

“ God bless you, now and always, my own ! ” he answered fervently as he embraced her again. “ Sleep well, and rise like my own bonnie bird in the morning ! ”

He lighted her candle, and watched her as she slowly went up the stairs, the light flickering on the wall, her distorted shadow, like a stealthy phantom, creeping after her.

Jack put his head out of the study door and wished her a cheery “ Good-night.” She paused as she reached the first landing, and nodded and smiled a parting salutation to them both.

The old man’s kind eyes clung to her till the very flutter of her skirts were out of sight. Then, with a sigh, he turned away, re-entered the study and closed the door.

* * * * *

The morning broke calm and lovely ; there was scarcely a ripple on the face of the still grey sea. The great red sun rose

from its watery bed, loosened its sheaf of golden lances, and with lavish generosity flung them earthward, laden with the sweet breath of the early morning.

The old Manor House looked lonelier and greyer than ever ; the mists of the night seemed to cling about it, as though loth to be dispelled by the opening day. The gardeners, going to their work before the rest of the world was alive, observed that the study window was open—a most unusual occurrence. Guided by natural curiosity, they crept quietly up and looked in. What did they see ? The candles had burnt low in their sockets, their tiny blue flames, flickering and sputtering, pale in the glare of the sun ! One long golden ray struck straight in like a finger of light, and touched an old grey head that was bent forward and rested on the table ; the hands fell listlessly by his side, and the grey head was matted and

wet, and dabbled in a pool of his red life-blood !

This was all that was left of Mr. Fleming. He had been shot through the brain.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE SAIL ON THE HORIZON.

A THRILL of horror and consternation ran through the household when the ghastly catastrophe was made known to them. There was a general rushing to and fro—everybody calling on somebody else to do something, and nobody knowing what ought to be done. Nobody liked to touch him—*it*. They stood around, whispering, wondering, and wringing their hands. At last Hans Hausmann came to his senses, and took temporary command.

“ Where’s Mr. Swayne and Miss Clarice ?
Has any one told them ? ”

No ; nobody could bear to be the first to carry the terrible news to those who loved him.

“ I’ll go—they’ve got to know it,” said Hans, gloomily ; and he went upstairs.

He was some time absent. He returned with a white, affrighted look, as though even a worse horror had passed before his mental vision.

“ Mr. Swayne is not in his room—he has not been to bed at all ; and Miss Clarice is nowhere to be found ! ”

In the midst of the wonder and the horror, the police, who had been at once communicated with, appeared upon the spot. Dr. Parkes, too, and Mr. Spencer, as the nearest magistrate, were hastily summoned, and hurried to the Manor House, having but a vague, confused idea of what had happened,

and were but ill-prepared for the ghastly spectacle that awaited them.

On the first brief examination of the body it was found that the deceased had been shot through the head—shot with his own derringer, which lay, as though hastily flung down, on the *left* side, and within a few feet of his body. Death had been instantaneous—that fact was speedily ascertained. By whom had that pistol been discharged?—was the natural wonder that rose in everybody's mind. All fitting investigation on that subject would follow in due course. Meanwhile, the first inquiry of both Mr. Spencer and Dr. Parkes was for Jack and Clarice, the nephew and adopted daughter of the dead man. On learning that *both* had disappeared, each looked upon the other as though momentarily struck dumb—paralyzed by the sudden and unexpected deepening of the mystery.

To Dr. Parkes and Mr. Laurence (who speedily appeared upon the scene) the wonder and the mystery of it was greater than to the rest of the world, for both were acquainted with Mr. Fleming's private affairs, and both had of late held a confidential position in the family, and therefore knew much that to the rest of the world was unknown. Their mutual suspicions immediately flew off in one direction, but neither of them uttered a single word.

A stormy wave of speculation arose, and swept like a mental whirlwind over all present; but first, before their varied speculations could find utterance, the poor blood-bespattered form—all that was left of the noble old man, so full of life, and love, and energy but yesterday—had to be cared for; and though they were kind, reverent hands that touched him, it seemed sad that *he*,

whose whole life had been one long, loving devotion, should be alone now—alone among strangers, with no loving lips to touch his ice-cold brow—no loving hands to close those wide-open, glassy eyes, wherein there still seemed to lurk a lingering look of horror that would not die out, even when the film of death fell over them ! What had they last looked upon ? and what was the last thought that flashed upon the living brain ? Ah, who could tell that ? Would ever the secret be divulged which the dead lips held sealed ?

On examining the room they found that nothing had been disturbed. His watch was in his pocket near to his dead heart : it had not stopped, and was still tick-ticking, telling the flight of the hours and minutes —its cold metal pulse still beating true to time, though his had stopped. His purse and his keys were all there, and the diamond

ring still flashed and glittered on his finger. There was no sign of a struggle, nor even of a movement anywhere—no derangement of his papers: it was evident that no curious, meddling hand had touched them: they were all arranged in due order and docketed, ready to be put away in the iron safe—which was open, the jewellery, plate, &c., which had already been placed therein, being untouched. So robbery had not been the cause of the catastrophe—that was plain to see. A copy of his will (the original being in Mr. Laurence's possession) lay open beneath his hand, as though he had been reading it over and considering whether all had been done according to his desire, and whether he had himself carried out his own intentions to the fullest extent, so that there could be no legal quibble in the matter.

No; nothing had been in the slightest degree disturbed. The pen was still clasped

in his stiffened fingers ; he had evidently been shot while writing, and had simply fallen forward—dead. Then the question arose, “Who had an interest in his life ? who would benefit by his death ?” The whole household at once underwent a preliminary sort of examination ; each and all said what they had got to say upon the subject ; but there was not much information to be got from them. They had retired early to rest ; the cook, in passing upstairs, had witnessed the loving “good-night” between Clarice and Mr. Fleming ; the parlourmaid, in the absence of Katrina, had assisted her young mistress to undress, lit her nightlight, and left her drowsily disposed to sleep. Hans, who had been the last to retire, had gone into the study at half-past eleven o’clock ; his master was then busily engaged writing, and desired him to bring a glass of lemonade—which he

did: it still stood untouched upon the table.

Hans had inquired if he should close the windows. Mr. Fleming said, "No, the night was warm, the air lovely: if he needed them closed, he would close them himself." Mr. Swayne was then out upon the terrace, walking up and down smoking, which he usually did every night before retiring to his room. He had paused, and looked in at the window, nodded in his usual genial way to Hans, and made some pleasant remark to his uncle. Hans had then bidden both gentlemen "Good-night," and left them.

From within the house that was all the light that could be thrown upon the mystery, which was of course increased ten-thousandfold by the fact of the strange disappearance of Clarice and Jack from the house. Every one was full of strange

thoughts and perplexities, in every heart some seed of suspicion was growing ; but at present they were careful to utter neither thoughts nor suspicions aloud. Mr. Laurence had his own private theory, and as soon as he could get away unperceived he left the house, and hurried down to the beach. It struck him—who knew of the contemplated cruise—as most probable that Jack and Clarice, from some unexplained reason, had gone down to the yacht earlier than had been at first intended, and were now awaiting Mr. Fleming's coming aboard the *Firefly*.

He was met by much questioning on the way—for the tragic news had spread like wild-fire ; the place was alive with it, from the village spreading down among the fishermen on the beach. Many eyes were dim, and many faces were full of mourning ; for the “Manor House folk” had always

been kind and sympathetic to the poor. It was not alone the generous help—that had no savour of charity in it—but it was the pleasant word, the pure grace of goodness, that had won their hearts, and, when the terrible catastrophe was reported, filled them with sorrowful regret.

Mr. Laurence knew—at least he had been told—where the *Firefly* was anchored, and he made his way to the beach with the intention of rowing out to her, to carry the sad news to those who had loved the dead man, and learn from them how things had chanced since he had parted from them the night before; but great was his surprise and consternation on reaching the beach! He looked round, and out over the sea: the gulls were wheeling in circles and flapping their wings overhead, screeching in discordant chorus; a small fleet of fishing-boats, with their

brown patched sails, were floating lazily upon the smooth, still water, and a large double-funnelled steamer was visible in the distance, leaving a trailing line of thin blue smoke behind it—but there was not a sign of the *Firefly* anywhere! Then—yes! on straining his eyes, he caught sight of something hovering like a huge white bird, it seemed, between sea and sky, and as he fixed his gaze earnestly upon it the outline became more defined, and he decided that it was the *Firefly* itself, with its beautiful white sails all set, scudding before the wind, hurrying away from the land, carrying with it—what? perhaps a clue to the red mystery, that lay so dumb and still in the old grey Manor House!

Mr. Laurence was so taken aback by the discovery of the *Firefly's* departure, that he sat down upon a huge boulder to shape his thoughts into something like order; but

the more he thought, the more utterly bewildered he became, and the farther away from any reasonable theory upon the extraordinary aspect of affairs. His legal mind could do nothing towards the unravelling of the tangled skein.

One or two fishermen came sauntering along the beach, and he endeavoured to gain from them some information as to how and when the *Firefly* had sailed, and if they had observed any one go aboard her in the night or early morning. No, they could tell him nothing of what he most desired to hear. They only knew she was riding at anchor in that lonely cove in the evening, and in the morning she was gone. No cottage was near ; no one had witnessed her departure. Then, with awestruck faces, they inquired was the terrible tale true that had drifted down to them from the Manor House ?

Mr. Laurence assured them of the truth

of the one ghastly fact ; but not desiring to hear, or enter into, speculations or discussion upon the subject, he rose up and went slowly back to the Manor House, reflecting gravely as he went along. A thousand theories and possibilities passed through his brain, but always some theories opposite arose to contradict and upset them. It was a long time before he could lay hold of anything likely to give a reasonable explanation of this strange affair ; at last, after much pondering and trying to piece the mental puzzle together in his mind, he thought he had found a possible solution of the mystery. He looked on his idea, turned it over in his mind, and considered it in all lights, and the more he so considered it, the more convinced he became that his solution was the right one. He resolved to take Dr. Parkes—who was as well acquainted with the family affairs as himself—into his confidence, and,

with that exception, to keep his idea to himself until the time came for him to give his hypothesis for the consideration of the proper authorities.

On returning to the Manor House, he found the first confusion was subsiding into something like order. Official hands are accustomed to lay hold of suchlike tragic mysteries ; and that which convulses human nature, and wrings some hearts with sorrow and despair, is to them a thing of everyday occurrence, and they go into it in a calm, commonplace fashion, sifting sentiments, guarding facts, and gathering every stray thread of evidence—working with automatic precision amid the mental storm and general hubbub of the world around them.

M. Lemaire had by this time appeared upon the scene in a state of great excitement—with a look of baffled vengeance glaring from his eyes, ill-suppressed fury in

his heart, and bitterness upon his tongue. He seemed to think that things had arranged themselves purposely for the subversion of his plans—just as they were so near completion, too ; when he had almost grasped the substance that had now faded like a shadow from his hand !

He presented himself as one most unfortunate, whom the dead man had robbed first of his wife, then of his child ! The secrets that the dead man had so jealously guarded all his life were now ruthlessly exposed, and dragged before the world's eyes—not in the simple, melancholy garb of truth, but painted with venom, in grimy, shameful colours, that tainted the dead man's honour, and smirched the fair fame of the woman he had loved and to whose memory he had been so fatally true !

The old man lay there so still and white, with his hands crossed peacefully upon

his breast, while his enemy lied away his good name, and tore the reputation he had held so dear into shreds and tatters, and flung it to the winds for his fellow-men to maul and play with as they would. But perhaps “lied” is hardly the right word to use, since the plain facts he stated were true; it was the false lights and shadows he threw upon them, and their general distortion, that made them viler than the vilest falsehoods—for

“The lie that is wholly a lie may be fought with, and
battled outright,
But the lie that is half a truth is a harder battle to
fight.”

M. Lemaire was listened to with open-mouthed, or rather open-eared, curiosity. His plausible story was interesting and attractive; everybody had always suspected that there was some strange mystery connected with the Manor House family, and

everybody was ready to accept any solution that might be given to them. For a time he was surrounded by an attentive, sympathetic throng—for when did a cruel, slanderous tale fall upon closed ears? It is so much easier to believe evil than good, and when the fame of a good or great man is touched, all hands are ready to fling mud upon his whiteness, drag him down from his high level, and trample him in the mire. The dead could not speak in his own defence. Wrapped in the mantle of eternal silence, *he* lay there at the mercy of his enemy!

CHAPTER XXIX.

“ BY PERSONS UNKNOWN ! ”

THE “ unaccountable disappearance of Mr. Swayne and Miss Lemaire ” created even more wonderment than the death of the old man himself. A thousand wild theories and speculations were afloat. Some thought that the young people must be in some way connected with the murder, even though they might not be the actual perpetrators of it ; else why should they have fled so suddenly, without giving an alarm, and left the ghastly discovery to be made by strangers ? But those who held opinions

affecting the characters of the absent ones were cautious in the uttering thereof, and only whispered among themselves, or ventilated their ideas in suspicious looks and mysterious innuendoes.

Others scouted *that* idea as too monstrous to be for a moment encouraged. They held to the belief that the young people had sailed unknowing of the catastrophe; perhaps had only gone for a short cruise, and would return with the intention of picking up the old man in the course of a few days. It was very possible that at the last moment he had found some loose ends and threads of business still left to be gathered together, with matters to be arranged, that might have been overlooked in the general bustle and preparations for their departure. Indeed, innumerable reasons, inexplicable to the outer world, might have influenced the family movements; and no

doubt, in the course of time, all that now seemed mysterious would be made plain—so said the most kindly and least curious portion of the community.

Those who knew least of, and had held little communication with, the family were severest in their comments, and wildest in their speculation. It is always the most ignorant who are always loudest in their condemnation and harshest in their judgments. Meanwhile the authorities were making their investigations with their usual subtlety and silence.

The old grey Manor House was shut up, and looked more weird and lonely than ever. The household talked in whispers and walked with stealthy footsteps, as people always do when there is death in the house. It is not that they fear to wake the sleeper, who is deaf to all earthly sounds: it is that they *feel* a presence that they cannot *see*—

some subtle, formless thing that broods at the coffin head, and follows them, an impalpable shadow, from room to room, the air impregnated by its invisible presence—that invisible *something* which is Lord of all the world.

The inquest, with all its horrible details, was duly carried out; but not a scrap of evidence was brought forward that could throw the slightest light upon the affair. A verdict was returned—“Murder by some person or persons unknown.” The idea of suicide was once suggested, but promptly rejected as a thing impossible, as the pistol, the instrument of destruction, lay some distance on the *left*, and there was an impression of a bloody hand upon the door! Whereas it was proved that he could not have moved after he was shot, but fell forward—dead. So that theory was easily disposed of. Neither was it at all probable that a

mere tramp, or any one with an eye to plunder, had committed the crime, as all the property, even to the purse and watch, was untouched ; and, moreover, he had been shot with his own derringer ! That fact added much to the mystery of the affair.

Then came the inquiry, “Who would benefit by his death ?” That question was easily answered. Had he an enemy in the neighbourhood ? Did any one owe him a grudge ? Had any one ever been heard to threaten him ? No ; on the contrary, he had won universal goodwill — his gentleness and benevolent kindness had softened some of the roughest characters in the neighbourhood. So thoughts, suspicions, speculations, got mixed together till they were lost in a sea of wild conjectures.

Messrs. Keene and Sharpe, the murdered man’s confidential London solicitors, had been communicated with, and came down

with all possible speed to Penally. They were accompanied by Mr. Stephen Stapleton, a cousin of the dead man, and barring Jack Swayne, his next-of-kin. When the will was read, it was discovered that, with the exception of a few legacies to servants, he had left the whole of his property to be divided equally between his nephew, John Swayne, and his adopted daughter, Clarice Lemaire. But as neither of these persons was on the spot, nor could at present be communicated with, official seals were put upon all the property in the house, and everything else was held by proper authority till something could be heard of the fugitives.

Meanwhile days dawned and days closed in ; yet there was no sign of the *Firefly's* return. It need hardly be said that all legal and official machinery was set in motion, trying to discover some trace of

the missing ones. This was a most difficult matter. If they had started to go anywhere by land, either by road or rail, there was every probability that a clue of some kind would be obtainable; but once at sea, who could track them across its pathless waters? However, all was done that could be done under the circumstances. Telegrams were sent to the several ports where it was thought most likely the *Firefly* would touch, and they must wait for the result.

M. Lemaire had sent people's thoughts spinning in an opposite direction, and they set themselves a new task in mental arithmetic. The family romance interested them as much as the family tragedy, and partially drew their thoughts away from it. M. Lemaire insisted that his daughter had been abducted without her consent by Jack Swayne. He believed that the old man had

been an accomplice in that movement. He shook his head at the idea that they had even been cognizant of the death, and dwelt on the probability that the murder had been committed *after* their departure. He talked of “retribution,” and appeared to think that Providence had struck this blow at the sinner’s head as an especial chastisement.

Ben, disreputable old Ben, went about the neighbourhood in a state of intense excitement, threatening, if anybody dared to asperse the character of the absent Mr. Jack, he would “swaller ‘em whole.”

Of course, after the fashion of our time, sensational paragraphs had appeared in all the London newspapers ; and Hugh Spencer, immediately on hearing of the tragedy, hurried down to Penally—with what feelings of horror and dismay may be readily imagined. He watched the proceedings with lynx-eyed attention, and listened to every-

body's theories, but commented upon none. He wandered about the village, gathering scraps of conversation and wonderings from the lips of the peasantry. From the highest source to the lowest, he gathered every thought, every suggestion, hoping to extract therefrom a ray of light to guide him in his search for Clarice. She was his soul, his life ! He grieved for the old man who had been so genially his friend, but he left the elucidation of the murder to the police. All his thoughts, all his care, all soul, were absorbed in the mystery of her disappearance ; and he registered a vow between himself and God to know no rest, no peace, till he held her face to face again !

Those who had known him in the old days scarcely recognized him now. He seemed to have been suddenly transformed from the gay, joyous Hugh Spencer to a

grave, sombre-hearted man. His genial spirit seemed to have died a sudden and violent death; while a strong, set purpose had taken possession of his senses. All expression had faded from his face, and he seemed to wear a mask of marble during those dreadful days.

At the Rectory, the tragic affair at the Manor House was the chief topic of conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Spencer. With the true spirit of their nature, they gloated over the ghastly details, and put the blackest possible interpretation on the young people's disappearance. Mrs. Spencer left not a rag of charity to cover their mangled reputations. She turned the story over in her mental maw, as though she relished the flavour of horror and of shame. She accepted M. Lemaire's strange story without the shadow of a doubt; and while seeming to deplore the wickedness of human nature,

really rejoiced at it, and gladly seized the opportunity it gave them to lash the imaginary vices of their parishioners.

The Rector grew stronger in his denunciation of the devil and all his works, and exhorted his congregation as though they one and all had murder in their hearts, and the seeds of all evil flourishing within them ; and Mrs. Spencer carried with her the flavour of fire and brimstone—it exhaled from her as she walked through the village, and flashed from her eyes even when it found no utterance from her tongue.

All this was intolerable to Hugh and Miriam ; the atmosphere of home, loaded with cruel slander against those they loved, was poison to their souls, and instead of seeking the companionship of their parents, and forming a sympathetic family circle, they avoided it as much as possible, and always found some business, some occupa-

tion elsewhere, rarely joining them except at meals, when the servant's presence acted as a sort of bridle on their tongues. But in spite of their endeavours they could not entirely avoid the subject; they were sometimes caught in the whirl, and struggled out of it as best they could.

One afternoon, when they had settled down for a cup of four o'clock tea, Mrs. Spencer commenced playing on her favourite string.

“If you remember,” she exclaimed, stirring her tea leisurely and addressing nobody in particular, “I always said there was some strange mystery up there”—jerking her head towards the Manor House—“but I little thought such a sink of iniquity had opened up in the midst of us. And to think that my own children should have been exposed to such pernicious influences! Well, I’m not surprised that a mystery of

that kind should have such a dreadful ending. The only creature that really deserves any sympathy is that poor, dear M. Lemaire, so cruelly robbed of his only child.”

Hugh bit his lip, and moved uneasily in his seat, as he exclaimed—

“For God’s sake, mother, talk of something else !”

“I can’t, Hugh,” she answered—“I can’t even think of anything else ; and as for your poor father, he can’t even rest in his bed. He seems to blame himself for having harboured such creatures in the parish ; and taken their money for the church window, too, and the schools !—no wonder everything’s gone wrong. It’s dreadful to think of there being so much hypocrisy in the world. You needn’t look so impatient, Hugh. I’m sorry to see your moral perceptions so blunted—instead of condemning

these people, as every honourable man ought to do, you actually *look* as though you'd like to take their part. As for your religious feelings, they are nowhere; for the disrespectful way in which you left the church just as your father probed this moral ulcer——”

“I wish that every decent person had followed my example,” interrupted Hugh; “the pulpit has no right to be made the vehicle for obnoxious personalities.”

“And it appears to me,” she rejoined, angrily, “that every place is the right place for the exposure of sins and sinners; and I am surprised to hear *you*, a clergyman's son, born, and I may say nursed, upon the highest principles of the Church, should take the part of murderers—and—and *worse!* And as for you, Miriam, I don't know what you are made of, sitting there and never saying a word.”

"If I did speak, mother, you might not like to hear what I should say," answered Miriam, in a low voice.

"What!" exclaimed Mrs. Spencer, who was stunned by the audacity of the harmless speech. "Is it possible that you, too, stand up for these miscreants!—for people who commit murder in cold blood—"

"Oh, mother, mother! there is *no* proof," cried Miriam, as if in pain.

"No proof! Why, if *he* were not guilty, why did he run away? And as for your friend Clarice, an unnatural daughter may well be an accomplice in—"

A dangerous light gleamed from Hugh Spencer's eyes. He sprang from his seat; he could control himself no longer.

"Mother!" he exclaimed, in a voice of suppressed thunder, "you are going the way to make me *hate* you! Do you know that I *love* that girl—that she is as pure

and innocent as one of God's own angels? —and I will not hear her sweet fame fouled by your malignant tongue."

Hugh was always so tenderly respectful to his mother, that she was aghast at his unusual wrathful violence of speech.

"Hugh, Hugh!" she exclaimed, "you forget I am your mother."

"Sometimes I wish to God I could," he said.

Mrs. Spencer was not hysterically emotional. Her wrath was lashed to a dead, white heat; her eyes glittered, her words were cold and bitter—like a sharp knife they cut to the bone, and made the sensitive spirit quiver and burn, as the flesh quivers and burns beneath the lash. Hugh hated domestic scenes, especially between himself and his mother, whom he, as a rule, treated with chivalrous respect. However much her petty, carping spirit

jarred upon his, and her self-righteousness and narrow ideas of Christianity clashed with his wider views, he could generally thrust and parry, and turn her harsh tirade into a laugh, the sunshine of his spirit flashing upon the gloom of hers. But now that she ventured within his sacred circle, and her calumnies fell upon those he loved and honoured, his anger knew no bounds—it was ready to rise up and drown her petty platitudes in a flood of honest indignation. He dared not trust himself to speak, for he knew he should say much that he would afterwards regret; so, with clenched lips and gleaming eyes, he strode out into the garden, and poor Miriam was left to bear the brunt of the maternal storm.

Already, in this short space of time, Miriam was much changed. She was pale and thin; the elasticity had gone out of her step; the light had faded from her eyes

—they were pale and expressionless, as they used to be before love lighted them—they were now full of a dull sadness that fell over them like a veil and never lifted. Presently she joined her brother in the garden; at least there was sympathy between these two. He had noticed how sad she was looking, and soon he guessed the reason why. At first they paced up and down beneath the ancient elms, neither of them speaking a word. Then she laid a hand upon his arm, looked at him with smileless eyes, and said, in a low voice that harmonized with her wan, white face—

“Hugh, can’t something be done? Must we sit still and wait? Don’t you see that these doubts, these suspicions of *him*, are killing me? You can swear to *her* purity and innocence; and I can swear to his loyalty, honour, and truth. Can’t something be done to *prove* it?”

She laid her head upon his shoulder with a dumb, suppressed anguish that was more eloquent than the cry of despair. This girl, who had been brought up in a school of repression, where feeling was folly and sentiment was laughed to scorn, felt perhaps a thousandfold more keenly than those whose emotional natures are in unison and sympathy with their surrounding.

Hugh saw at once how matters stood with her. He passed his arm silently round her. Whatever he thought, however much inclined he might have been to blame the absent, he made no signs ; neither did he worry her with those words of tactless sympathy with which our best friends sometimes irritate us to madness. After a momentary pause, he said, soothingly—

“ Is it so?—my poor little sister ! ” and once more there was silence between them—a sweet, sympathetic silence. Each com-

prehended the other; one chord of feeling thrilled through both their natures; and though he could find small comfort for himself, he found some cheering word to say to her. "See here, Miriam," he added, "don't be downhearted; there's an old woman's saying, but a very true one, 'It is always darkest before dawn.' I admit things look black and bewildering at present; but I feel that all will be made plain soon. We *will* solve this dreadful mystery. Through these muddy waters we'll somehow find the truth. Remember, dear, *I* pull stroke-oar in this boat, and, with God's blessing, we shall reach 'land at last.' "

CHAPTER XXX.

SURMISE AND SUSPICION.

A NINE days' wonder" is a common expression ; but does anything ever occupy the attention of the world, or the interest of any community either great or small, for nine whole days ! A storm of emotional wonder or horror may shake the world one day, but it sinks into a calm the next. Armies may be annihilated, thrones shaken, kings driven from their seats, the earth may open and swallow up cities. A momentary shock, a thrill of excitement, follows—then fresh armies are levied, new

rulers arise, new cities are built above the ruins of the old, and all is forgotten in a week! We open our morning papers, and the news of some fresh disaster obscures the memory of the old. Truly if some were told that their dearest friend had eaten his own grandmother, or buried his wife and six children in the back garden, there would be an uplifting of hands, an expression of horror and amazement—and that is all. By the morrow, both the horror and the wonder would have died the natural death of all violent emotions.

So the mystery, the crime, and the whole romantic story of the Manor House, became, in the same way, a thing of the past. The excitement that had for a time agitated the neighbourhood died out, and the good folk settled down to the old dead level; they went about their daily business, and soon ceased to talk about it. There was a vague

idea prevalent that it would all be cleared up one day; and the fever-heat of curiosity once over, they were content to wait. It is so easy to sit down patiently under the calamities of our friends. Only in the minds of the few personal friends of the family was the interest in the mystery unabated—indeed it seemed to grow stronger as the time rolled on and not a scrap of knowledge, either from official or private sources, came to hand. No tidings had been heard of *Firefly*, at any of the ports where inquiries had been made; indeed the little vessel might have been a phantom ship, and vanished in the mists of cloud-land with all her crew, so lost was she to all human intelligence.

“The police are slow at their work,” exclaimed Mr. Laurence, as Dr. Parkes and Hugh Spencer dropped into his office, as it was their habit to do, in the early

morning, to talk over things and learn if the slightest clue had been found, or was likely to be found ; for it was only through Mr. Laurence that they learned how the investigations were going on with the official and legal authorities—Mr. Laurence keeping up communication with all parties, and taking his friends into his confidence just as far as he thought wise and prudent, and no farther. “They are too dilatory, and don’t lay hold of the right end of affairs ; so bound up in official buckram and conceit, too, they won’t take a suggestion from a sensible outsider. *I* put the clue into their hands ; if they had only followed it up they’d have run the murderer to earth by this time —ay, and solved the other part of the mystery, too !”

“I don’t take your view of the case, you know. I never did ; my ideas flow in quite a different direction,” replied Dr. Parkes, drumming thoughtfully upon the table.

Hugh looked at Mr. Laurence with inquiring earnestness, as he said, eagerly—

“ Give *me* your clue. If it is only as fine as the film of the spider’s web it may guide us somewhere. I’m tired of groping in the dark. I shall go mad if something doesn’t happen soon. Give me your clue; one man may see when another man is blind. My heart, my very life, is bound up in this matter. I love Clarice! and my instinct may guide me where reason and hired investigators lose their way.”

“ Well, you know, M. Lemaire and our poor old friend were the most deadly enemies. You know the whole story, so I needn’t go into that. I will give you my theory—of course in strict confidence. I think it very possible, indeed I firmly believe, that M. Lemaire got scent, by some underhand means, of Mr. Fleming’s intended movements in regard to Clarice—the object

of the one being to place her beyond the reach of the man or of the law ; the object of the other being to keep her within it. That being an accepted fact, Lemaire naturally, on gaining the information, rushed off to the Manor House in red-hot haste and anger, to stop the proceedings even at the eleventh hour. A violent quarrel between the two men would equally naturally ensue, and—well, if you see an eddy in the gutter you may comprehend the maelstrom ! Great things come from small ; from the first angry word you know what ensues—evil passions rise higher and higher till they are lashed to white heat, and—murder follows. At least, to my mind, that is the only way of explaining this melancholy business. I see no other feasible way of accounting for —other things.”

“ Suppose that your idea on the one side should be true,” exclaimed Hugh, thought-

fully, "how does that touch upon the disappearance of—Clarice and Jack Swayne?"

"The greater case involves the less," replied Mr. Laurence. "It seems to me not only possible, but most likely true, that Clarice, by some strange chance, either witnessed or became cognizant of the murder, and that Swayne, in order to avoid the horrible position of a child giving evidence against her own father—bad and unnatural as that father was—in the horror and confusion of the moment thought only of *her*, and carried her off to sea—the yacht being all in readiness, and, as you know, waiting to take the whole party on a cruise."

Dr. Parkes whistled. Hugh reflected for a few moments; then he said, speaking with slow consideration—

"Your view of the case is certainly worth consideration, though I don't quite take it

in. In the first place, it was proved that Clarice went to bed early——”

“ But it was not proved that she did not come down again,” interrupted Mr. Laurence, sharply ; “ she might have returned in search of something she had forgotten.”

“ Not likely,” responded Hugh, gravely. “ According to the maid’s statement she left her in bed, tired and drowsily disposed to sleep, a little after ten o’clock ; it is not likely she would have dressed and come downstairs again. Now Mr. Fleming was seen by Hausmann writing in his study at half-past eleven o’clock ! Swayne was out on the terrace smoking ; so the catastrophe could not have happened till after that time. Besides, she loved the old man so devotedly she would never have left him—never ! She was not a coward ; she was loyal and true to the core ! She clung to him through life, and would never have deserted him in

death ! Besides, he was left, you say, just as he had fallen forward dead. Would any loving child have left a father so ? Why, she would have called frantically for help, and roused the house ! ”

“ There’s something in what you say,” observed Mr. Laurence ; “ still, I don’t give up my idea. I can’t make it clear to you, and indeed it is not quite clear to me, but I believe there is something in it.”

“ Was there not some little passage at arms between Mr. Fleming and his nephew on that last night ? ” inquired Hugh, after a momentary pause—“ some trifling disagreement ? I fancy I have heard something of the kind alluded to.”

“ Oh, that was a mere nothing,” answered Mr. Laurence, “ a matter of delicacy on Mr. Fleming’s part. Miss Lemaire being the heiress, and holding such a large property in her own hands, he thought she

would like to hold a certain portion conjointly with—well, with Mr. Hugh Spencer, if she married him ; he did not like the idea of all being on the one side.”

“ So he spoke of me in that way, did he ? the dear old man ! God bless him ! ” exclaimed Hugh, deeply touched that he should have been held so closely allied with Clarice in the old man’s heart. But men never like to show their emotions ; a moment after he added, “ And what said Swayne ? What objection had he got to make to that ? ”

“ Well, he certainly did object rather strongly. He thought there had been quite enough of the ‘joint ownership’ arrangement already (of course he alluded to his own formerly projected marriage with Clarice), and he dared to say that the present arrangement would come to smash like the last ; and he did not believe that even yet Clarice knew her own mind.”

“He said that, did he?” exclaimed Hugh, with a red, wrathful flush upon his face; “anything else? And how did Mr. Fleming receive his impertinent interference?”

“I don’t think he liked it at first,” answered Mr. Laurence; “but in the end Swayne carried his point, for the codicil was not added.”

“Did he know the contents of the will?” inquired Hugh, eagerly.

“How could he?” observed Dr. Parkes; “the will was not read till after the funeral.”

“But he knew the contents well enough,” said Mr. Laurence, rather impatiently, “as the will was read over to him more than once; but I really don’t see what these legal details have to do with the question at issue.”

“I don’t know,” said Hugh, thoughtfully; “in a case like this, surrounded as it seems

with impenetrable mystery, we can reject nothing that may possibly throw even a glimmering side-light upon the subject."

"If you look for a side-light in that direction," exclaimed Dr. Parkes, gruffly, "you will be lost in a worse darkness than you are in at present."

Hugh relapsed into an abrupt silence, for as he was speaking his sister's pale, sad face floated before his mind's eye. A thrill like an electric shock ran through his veins ! Was it possible—could the man she loved be guilty of murder ? and such a murder, too ! He was affrighted at his own thoughts ; but the more he tried to get away from them and shake them off, the more and the closer they clung to him, till he grew sick in the contemplation of bare possibilities. For although Jack Swayne and Clarice were not allied by blood, yet there was the tie of lifelong association

between them ; and *if*—it was a very large “*if*,” but it was there—*if* he had been guilty of the death of the man who had been a father to them both, why the shock, the horror of the fact, would kill her ! And these two—this possibly guilty man and his own pure love—were away somewhere—away together !

His brain reeled with its weight of conflicting thoughts ; so many interests and affections were involved in the elucidation of this matter, that even if the truth were eventually brought to light it seemed that it must bring sorrow, misery, and shame with it. And on whom, and where, would the shame fall ? He could not tell ; he could only feel—till his faculties seemed numbed with anxiety and despair.

Only those who have suffered it can comprehend the dull pain, or, to some temperaments, the living agony, of enforced

inactivity when the mental atmosphere is full of excitement; when we feel an irrepressible longing to be up and doing, and there is nothing to be done; an impulsive throbbing of heart and brain, a wild desire to stir and struggle, when we are bound hand and foot by circumstances stronger than chains of iron. This biding-time between the acts of life is hard to live through; we know that behind the curtain, on some invisible stage, strange scenes are enacting, and circumstances which touch *us* to the very core of our being are evolving and commingling, and we cannot lift a hand to direct their course! Though our hearts may be aching and breaking with anxiety, we must sit with folded hands and wait. When we *know* that our beloved are dead, we grieve and become resigned to the fact; but while they are wandering through the land of uncertainties and encompassed by

a thousand shapeless possibilities, we are torn with anxieties and know no rest. But however much we may rebel, we cannot accelerate the course of events, any more than we can force a flower into bloom before its time.

Hugh felt to the fullest extent the dreariness of the days and hours—dark days they were indeed! He felt like one bound hand and foot, and lived through the dull, commonplace days with a dull pain at his heart; yet he was always on the alert, ready to start, body and soul, in any direction where there was a chance of discovering the *truth*.

All attempts to connect M. Lemaire with the affair had so far failed utterly; suspicion lived still, but it was unsupported by a single fact.

Hugh tried to relieve the monotony of suspense, which was telling rapidly on his health and spirits, by plunging into hard

study, and worked with a zest hitherto unknown to him. There is nothing like work for blunting the edge of the keenest sorrow ; it cannot destroy, but it can ameliorate the pain of it. Men can always get that kind of relief, while women stay at home and brood till their trouble seems too hard to bear.

While her brother was out in the midst of the whirling world, Miriam stayed at Penally, exposed to all the petty misery of an unsympathetic home, where the spirit of antagonism was always rampant to the fore. She bore the stings of her mother's waspish tongue with calm equanimity, never being provoked to reply ; only the more steadily performing her round of duties, and trying to smile and be cheerful according to the demands of the social home circle. If she dared to look grave or thoughtful, she was accused of "flying in

the face of Providence" and participating in the crimes of the evil-doers. She seemed to carry a soothing atmosphere about with her when she went about among the poor people ; she had always a pleasant smile and cheering word for those who were sick, and kindly sympathy with those who were in trouble. She had felt that "touch of nature" which makes all the world akin —that was all she wanted to galvanize her frozen sympathies into active life. Although anxious, and often heartsick and weary with waiting, she was not all unhappy. She *believed* in the man she loved —nothing could shake her faith in *him*. So, with love and hope in her heart, she could not starve outright.

Meanwhile the lovely autumn days gave way to the wild wintry weather, and when the snow was on the ground and frosty chilliness in the air there came to her the

first bud of promise, bearing within its folded leaves the scent of a summer gladness. It was only a telegram, brief at best. It was from Hugh, and ran thus :

“ News at last. Hurrah. Will write.”

That was all.

CHAPTER XXXI.

UNDER THE ORANGE TREES.

WE will leave England, with its wild wintry weather, leaden skies, and storms of sleet and snow, behind us, and betake ourselves—in imagination at least—to more genial climes—to St. Augustine, a sweet, pleasant, out-of-the-world place; a quaint old Spanish city, the oldest in the United States, in far-off Florida. Dear, romantic St. Augustine! it has none of the ugliness, but all the picturesqueness of a glorious old age. It is like an old-fashioned beauty who has slept for centuries, and

lain in state through all the changing years, and now wakes up in all her ancient fur-belowes and paint and patches, and walks and talks with us in the formal phraseology of dead and gone days. The romance of its ancient glory clings to it still. The tourist of to-day seems quite out of place. The dignity and stately grace of the Spanish cavaliers seems to linger everywhere. We can almost fancy we see their shadowy forms stoop their plumed heads as they pass in and out of their ancient homes, with spears jangling and swords clanging at their heels. In the midst of flower gardens and orchards, some few pretty homes of to-day have grown up in this land of the yesterdays —their modern features, with quaint gabled roofs and old nooks and corners, by no means mar the beauty of the scene.

It is a lovely day. A supreme stillness reigns over the silent sea, and still more

silent land ; the great sun hangs like a globe of fire in the pale blue skies, and floods the land with golden light ; the green earth, with her wealth of fruit and flowers in her lap, seems wrapped in a sweet languor, as though she had fallen asleep and was smiling in her dreams ; and the red roses and white lilies nod their pretty heads drowsily and sleep with her. The very dogs doze in the sunlight ; they don't seem to have a good honest bark or vigorous wag of the tail left in them. Life, the busy nineteenth century life we know of, exists not here. We seem to have gone to sleep in the world of to-day, and been carried away in our dreams and woke up in an ancient city of two centuries ago ! Here, in this out-of-the-world region, we come upon the track of the missing ones, Jack Swayne and Clarice Lemaire ! He has a worn, anxious look upon his face, and she is perhaps a trifle more fragile, but she

is lovelier than ever. They had been walking round the ramparts of the ancient “Fort Marion,” and she sat down to rest, looking out over the beautiful blue water towards home, towards England. The balmy air was full of peace; it seemed made up of some heavenly alchemy—a tissue of golden glory and shimmer of silver sheen. Looking out to the horizon, Clarice sat silent for some time—then said, with some show of impatience, as if uttering a thought aloud that had been vexing her in silence—

“Jack, why do you tell people you are my brother? I hate lies.”

“Well, you know, Clary, I really am a sort of brother,” he answered, a slight flush rising to his cheek, “and it makes things easy, and prevents people making awkward inquiries.”

“I don’t see why inquiries should be awkward,” she answered; “but then I don’t

know, everything seems strange altogether ; and Jack, shall we have to stay here long ? I'm getting so tired of waiting. Don't you think it seems odd that father has not joined us before this ? ”

“ Well,” he answered, speaking with slow deliberation, “ I dare say it does seem odd.”

“ *Seem !* it *is* odd, of course,” she exclaimed ; “ and it is odder still that we don't hear from him. I have written to him twice, and it is so unlike him not to answer me.”

“ Perhaps he has not got your letters,” observed Jack ; “ you know the post is very irregular in these out-of-the-world places ; they may have miscarried.”

“ Two letters can't have miscarried,” she answered, desperately ; “ and—and there's Hugh ; his silence is stranger still ! ” she added ; her lips trembled, and there were tears in her voice. “ I don't understand it,” she

added, with a thoughtful puckering of her brows. "And somehow *you* are changed, Jack; you're not a bit like yourself."

"Such anxieties as I have had, Clarice, are apt to change a man, and in a sort of way to sober him down," said Jack, gravely.

"Dear old Jack!" she answered, smoothing his hand caressingly. "I know I've been a great trouble to you; but there's no more cause for anxiety. I am well, quite well now; only a little restless and uneasy." She paused for a second, then, peering curiously in his face, she added: "I feel as though you were trying to keep me in the dark, to hide something from me—you talk with a gag upon your tongue; not at all in your old free, frank way; and then there's Katrina—she puzzles me; I often find her in tears—and you——"

"You are not going to say that you find

me in tears too ! ” he said, trying to speak lightly.

“ No,” she answered, with a short dry laugh. “ Men don’t cry ; but I’ve seen you look worse than tears. Jack, you must talk to me now ; I know I have been very, very ill, and when I’ve asked you about things you’ve put me off, saying I ‘ was too easily excited—not strong enough to talk.’ Well, there is no longer that excuse, I am well and strong enough for anything ; and your strange putting off, and the suspense about father and—and Hugh is vexing and troubling me more than any other thing could do.”

“ Tell me exactly what it is you want to know, dear, and I will answer you to the best ability,” said Jack, cautiously.

“ There ! that’s a stiff, unnatural speech for you to make ; it is worthy of a lawyer’s clerk ! ” she exclaimed. “ I can’t ask you

questions, because I don't know what questions to ask ; but I want to know everything straight off exactly as it happened, from the time I was taken ill. I remember I went to bed that night ; I remember we were to start for a cruise in the Greek Isles the next morning ; I remember going upstairs, and your looking out of the study door to say 'good-night.' After that all is confusion, almost a blank. I have a dim, indistinct memory of being ill on board the boat."

" You had brain fever—a severe attack," said Jack, shortly.

" Was that it? Well, I remember watching the flies upon the ceiling, and the waves running and leaping beside the vessel, and you and Katrina gliding in and out like shadows ; I used to wonder whether I was dead, everything was so vague and shadowy. I don't remember speaking or hearing anybody else speak. Then I remember lying

on deck sometimes, and being carried on shore here. I was too weak to think, to wonder, or to speak ; I came back to myself very slowly, then I began to wonder about things vaguely. *Now it is different,*" she added, firmly ; " I want to know when and how I was taken ill ? It is horrible to be so ignorant about one's self—and why father changed his mind ; he must have had a very strong reason, or he would never have left me to come away with you—alone. I don't see why you should hesitate, Jack—unless," her lips quivered, " that—perhaps it had something to do with—*him*, whom I have never known and can never call ' father. ' " Her colour went and came as she spoke the last words reluctantly. " Jack, is it—is it that he is on our track—is following us ? " she added, quickly.

" No, I don't think it had anything to do with him," answered Jack. " Do not be

afraid of his following us ; he could never find us here."

" Then what is all this secrecy about ? "

she demanded.

" Clarice, dear, can't you wait till——"

" Till father comes, you mean to say ? "

she interposed. " Of course I could, if I knew when that would be ; it is exactly that which worries and troubles me so. His absence—his silence, and your extraordinary behaviour—frightens me ; my heart feels like a lump of ice ; the worst that is, is nothing to what we dread it may be."

The people were beginning to gather on the ramparts to watch the sun set ; the gorgeous glow in the west cast a reflection like a tender blush on the horizon in the eastern sky—so clear was the atmosphere in that southern clime that the soft rose tint in the east lingered as long as the fiery lines in the west, and only faded with the

dying daylight ; and as the good folk of the town came sauntering to and fro, conversation upon any but the most ordinary topics was impossible ; so Jack proposed they should stroll homeward, to which Clarice quite agreed.

They slowly wended their way down from the ramparts, and through the narrow, crooked streets, with their overhanging balconies and trailing wealth of sweet-scented flowers ; they passed out of the city, and turned round for a moment's pause to watch the sun setting. It seemed as though the gates of glory were opened to let him in, with his brilliant retinue of crimson and gold clouds, which filled the western hemisphere with light, feathery plumes, like the heads of richly robed warriors following their kind. For a moment through those filmy gates of gold we seem to catch a glimpse of “ the land beyond the

sunset," with its walls of jasper and isles of silver light. Then they passed on along the narrow road, till they reached the lovely orange grove, in the midst of which they had made their home — their temporary home. Is there anything in the world, I wonder, more beautiful than those orange trees, with their shining foliage of dark, glossy green, snowy blossoms, and rich golden fruit.

By a thousand pleasant ways Jack tried to beguile Clarice, and win her away from her determination—he might as well have tried to beguile a granite rock; he talked more gaily and amusingly than he had done for many a day; but the gaiety was forced, and he knew that Clarice knew it. In the evening they took their coffee beneath the spreading branches of a blooming orange tree — the giant of his tribe. Clarice once more moved to the attack.

"Now, Jack," she exclaimed, "we are quite alone now; only our two selves and God — there is nobody to interrupt us; begin at the beginning, and tell me everything *now*, or I shall think things more horrible than the greatest horror could be."

"Can't you be patient for a little longer, Clarice?" with a sigh that almost deepened into a groan.

"No," she answered, "I cannot be patient any longer—what is the use of hiding from me to-day what I must know to-morrow? there is no sense in it!"

Still he struggled to get out of his corner.

"I think it is a pity you should worry yourself and me so unnecessarily," he said, with some irritation: "suppose there is nothing—that I have nothing to tell you?"

"In that case," she answered, "as I am neither a lunatic nor a child, I shall emancipate myself from your guardianship, return

to Penally in the best way I can, and learn the truth for myself."

He saw the set expression of her mouth, and the firm, determined look that came into her face, and knew that she would keep her word. With an angry motion she had started to her feet ; he put out his hand and drew her down beside him.

"Clarice, darling," he exclaimed, "if you asked me for a dose of poison, would you blame me if I refused to give it you ? "

"There are cases when one kind of poison is needed to counteract the effect of a worse," she answered, calmly ; "and, poison or no poison, I mean to have what I want—now."

Jack Swayne was a brave man, and more than once had faced deadly peril with an undaunted spirit ; he could conceive no physical danger that would not find him strong to grasp it ; but the sight of Clarice's

questioning face unmanned him quite ; he could not look into her soft blue eyes and speak ! Almost as soon could he take a dagger and thrust it into her fair white breast !

“ Oh, my love ! my love ! ” he exclaimed, with a burst of uncontrolled emotion—so strange in him, the unemotional ! “ You are asking me to *kill you !* ”

A silence, a breathless silence, like the lull before a storm fell between them ; the night was so still, there was not a sound in the air, only a slight rustle in the orange boughs above their heads, like the rustle of a watching angel’s wings. Through the dusky shadows that the moonlight threw around them they looked into each other’s faces—*she* with a look of questioning horror in her eyes.

“ Jack,” she exclaimed, in a sort of soul-freezing whisper, “ your hand was warm a

moment ago — now it is cold as ice ! Come out from these shadows, and let me see your face ! ”

She dragged him beyond the shade of the broad branches, and forced him to lift his face into the full flood of the moonlight. She gazed at him with painful intentness, with all her soul centred in her eyes. She seemed to look not only *at*, but *through* him, and sent her thoughts wandering through unknown regions, forcing *his* thoughts to lead the way—till they stood face to face with—*what?* He bore her scrutiny in agonized silence. Poor fellow ! he did not wish to speak. At last, in a low voice, and drawing her breath in short, quick gasps, she said :

“ What—what is this—I remember now ? a dream I had—a horrible dream ! Jack ! Jack ! tell me the truth ! Oh ! my God ! *was it a dream ?* ”

CHAPTER XXXII.

SHE KNOWS THE TRUTH !

A DEADLY calm fell on Clarice as, with that despairing cry, she came out of the land of shadows wherein her soul had been lost.

It is with the mind, as with the body : in moments of mortal peril, or under stress of circumstances worse than death, we draw ourselves together, knit every nerve, as it were, into a compact mass, and brace body and soul, till we are strong enough to bear the weight of horror that threatens and

falls upon us, without shattering our reason quite.

In such dumb agony, too great for words —for after all words are poor things to express strong emotions — Clarice, ghastly pale, motionless, except for the nervous twitching of her hands, listened while *he* spoke at last, and told her all, with infinite tenderness and most compassionate sympathy. He gave her an account of all that had happened—not exactly as it is told here, for here things are related precisely as they occurred, while in the telling to *her* he softened the details, smoothed the sharp edges, and just threw as much light upon the subject as was necessary for her comprehension. Here the course of events is told in the tragic nakedness of unvarnished truth.

On the evening before the intended cruise of the *Firefly*, after Clarice had retired to

rest, and the whole house had followed her example, Mr. Fleming continued busily writing, sorting, arranging, and re-arranging his papers, Jack occasionally lounging in to discuss some trifling point of mutual interest, or talk over their projects for the morrow—the morrow that for one of them would never come! There were so many exciting topics of conversation, that the time flew imperceptibly past. They hugged themselves on the success of their plan, and laughed over the discomfiture of Lemaire, and imagined his rage, when he found himself at the eleventh hour “checkmated” when he thought he had just won the game. Mr. Fleming decided that he should not go to bed at all, it was not worth while for only so few hours, besides, his brain was too much excited, he couldn’t sleep even if he went to bed. It was then nearly four o’clock, but he advised Jack to go to his room for a

couple of hours' rest ; and Jack accordingly went upstairs for that purpose.

He had scarcely reached his own room, indeed before he had fairly closed his door, he fancied he heard a low creaking sound, as of a door being opened, from the gallery below. He went to the balustrade and leaned over ; he held his breath, and for a second his heart seemed to stand still !—he beheld Clarice emerging slowly from her room just as she had risen from her bed, her bare, slipperless feet fell soundlessly upon the floor. She was deadly pale—he saw that from the full light of the moon, which streamed in through a large bay window at the end of the gallery—her lips moved convulsively, and her wide open eyes were fixed forward with a gleam of terror in them, as though she were following some invisible spectral horror that he could not see.

He had heard of, but had never seen her in one of these somnambulistic disturbances, and had been told, in the event of his ever seeing her in that condition, that she must on no account be spoken to, as the fright of the sudden awakening might, with her delicate organization, be fatal! He did not know what to do, but to follow her quietly; and in breathless silence he moved after her down the stairs. As though guided by some unseen hand she went straight on, turning neither to the right nor to the left, till she reached the study; she turned the handle of the door and went in. He did not follow her very closely, from feelings of delicacy, lest she might awake, turn round and see him. He hesitated for a moment whether he should follow her into the study, or leave his uncle — who better understood these attacks—to deal with her alone. He did not hesitate long; first he heard a faint

movement, an underbreath ejaculation from his uncle—which was immediately followed by the sound of a shot! He rushed forward in time to see the smoking pistol fall from Clarice's hand, as a cry of unutterable terror burst from her lips. With gasping breath she staggered towards the door, and would have fallen, but he caught her in his arms. Staring up in his face, in a wild, affrighted way, she exclaimed—

“Jack! what is it? Wake me! wake me! It is such a horrible dream!”

“Hush, Clarice! Hush, for God's sake! What have you done?”

“Where am I?” she continued, struggling in his arms, her startled senses only half awake. “Am I at sea? Don't let *him* take me away! Oh, father! father! hold me!” She gazed vaguely, wildly around, and clung to him convulsively, moaning piteously.

Jack called softly to his uncle, but he never stirred. Half distracted, scarce knowing what he did, he carried her to the alcove, and laid her on the sofa ; her excited spirit had overwrought itself, and she sank insensible from his arms. With closed eyes and shut senses she lay like one dead.

Jack hurried to the old man's side. He sat there exactly as he was found on that dreadful morning, his head fallen forward, and the life-blood oozing from a wound in the temple. Jack lifted the dear grey head, and looked in the face ; the light of unconscious life still lingered in the eyes—it had not had time to die out of them. He lifted the hands ; they were limp and nerveless ; no pulse was to be felt. Quick as a flash Jack realized the fact—*he* was past hope ! His first impulse was to rouse the house, call for help. Then, struck with horror and despair, he glanced at the white, uncon-

scious figure of Clarice as she lay apparently lifeless there.

A rush of thoughts passed through his brain, quick as a stream of quicksilver, whirled in mad confusion for a moment, then settled down into *one*—one great thought—*Clarice*. His mind was on the rack, and he groaned aloud—

“My God! if she awakes and sees the sight that *I* see,” he thought, “the horror of it will kill her ! ”

Then, quick as a flash of lightning, bursting over a dark landscape, illuminates its every leaf and feature, the whole situation flashed upon his brain. If the truth were known what would be the consequence to *her* ? Apart from the home-tragedy, the dismay and horror of it, he beheld the law—the cruel, but most necessary law—with its cold grip upon *her*. It would have no mercy, would not even com-

prehend. It would force her to stand a criminal trial, and submit her to slow torture, with all its crushing legal machinery in motion, wringing her poor spirit as the rack wrings the flesh! The law would only comprehend the fact that *he* was dead and *she* killed him. The how, why, and wherefore must be worked out in accordance with legal views. The most merciful result would send her to suffer and to die, as she had been born, in a lunatic asylum! This dread had been the haunting horror of her life. She *must* be saved from that, from everything! He thought only of her and for her. Past, present, and future were all merged in the one thought—"Clarice."

To the day of his death, the doings of that and the next few hours came to him only as a mist of broken memories; he could remember nothing distinctly. He seemed to be out of himself, and only dimly conscious

of a miserable, bare-headed, haggard-looking man flying away from something, with a wan, white woman—hastily wrapped in a mantle, half insensible, and moaning faintly—in his arms, her golden hair streaming over his shoulders as he hurried along through the cool, moonlit night, through the peace and quiet of the sleeping world, with his brain on fire, and one wild fear tugging at his heart. The way seemed so long, so endless; but he reached the shore at last.

The dimpled waters ran and curled in low, moonlit ripples at his feet, and there was the *Firefly* calmly riding at anchor not very far from the land. It was some little time—indeed, the first grey dawn was slowly creeping down from the skies—before he succeeded in attracting the attention of those on board. Raging and fuming inwardly, every moment glancing fearfully

round lest any living soul might be about, he waited. Every minute seemed to hold an eternity of time ; but as the dawn approached the crew were on the alert, and a little boat speedily came skimming across the water to carry them out to the yacht.

“ Quick ! weigh anchor, and out to sea,” was the first order uttered as his foot touched the deck.

Katrina was there, and with questioning wonder and terror in her eyes, received the seemingly lifeless body of her young mistress in her arms.

They stopped several times on the way to take in provisions ; and knowing that every endeavour would be made to trace the vessel, Jack had her name, *The Firefly*, painted out, and *The Daffodil* painted in its stead. Thus they managed to escape detection.

Shorn of its tragic details, the simple fact

was all he told to Clarice—told with the tenderest affection and the most compassionate sympathy.

She heard it with hands close clenched and head bowed down ; her breast heaved as though labouring with her struggling breath, but she said nothing. Her very soul was shaken and convulsed with an agony too deep for words. In speechless, tearless despair she sat like one carved out of stone. In moments of supreme suffering human nature is dumb ; while it is being dragged through unutterable bitterness it cannot speak. Jack watched her anxiously. He had expected a wild, hysterical outburst according to woman's way ; but this tearless, speechless way of taking his communication frightened him. Had the blow fallen and struck her reason ? Would it totter and fall ? He shrank from the terrible idea, touched her gently, and whispered—

“Clarice !”

Then she flung up her arms, and a cry—such a piercing cry as he hoped never again to hear from mortal lips—broke from her—

“Father ! Father !” she cried, lifting her eyes and her whole soul heavenward, while a torrent of tears, as though falling from some pent-up fountain, rained down her cheeks, and the pathos of her voice touched him to the heart. “I didn’t do it. Oh ! good, kind God, let him lean down from heaven and hear me. It was not I, your own Clarice. Father, darling, it was some evil things that took my hand and used it ; not I, your poor Clarice. Oh, my God !” she added, shivering, “it is too horrible ! Jack, do you think he knew, that he saw *my* hand raised against him ; that his last look was on *me* ; that he carried to the grave the picture of me—the child he

loved — with *my* hand lifted against his precious life ? ”

“ No, no ! ” exclaimed Jack, quickly. “ I don’t think—I am sure he did not know.”

“ But he knows now,” she moaned ; “ he knows now. The dead are so much wiser than the living.” Then her thoughts darted across the sea, and in a quickly changing mood she turned upon Jack angrily. “ And you left him—left him who so loved us both —left him alone ! Oh, it was base, it was cruel, to throw your loyalty, truth, and honour to the winds, to desert *him* dead who living was your friend and father—and all for what ? ”

“ It was for *your* sake, Clarice,” he exclaimed, deprecatingly.

A flush rose to his cheeks. He felt he deserved her reproaches ; yet it was hard that she should utter them.

“ For my sake ! ” she echoed ; “ and how

dared you rob me of my sin? I had a right to my punishment. It is the only thing God has left me," she added, despairingly. "I will go and take it, tell all the truth, and show my hand—this hand red with his dear life's blood—and then die!"

"Clarice, spare yourself," said Jack, earnestly. "You are no more guilty than I. We are not accountable for what we do in our sleep. As well hold us responsible for our dreams."

"There must be some devil in me hiding away somewhere that made me do it. Who knows?" she added, with a strange glitter in her eyes, "perhaps he has not done with me yet! It is no use to tell me I am innocent, Jack."

"But you are innocent, my darling. *He* knows all now, and if he could speak, it would only be to comfort you."

"I know it—I know it! God bless him!"

she exclaimed, her eyes softening beneath their veil of tears. Then her erratic thoughts flew off, and she added, “But he can’t speak; he can’t come back, and I shall never hear his voice again. Ah! but I think I shall. That last ‘Good night; God bless you, darling,’ will ring in my ears always. We must go back to Penally at once, Jack; do you hear? at once. And I will tell all the truth to all the world, and *he* will forgive me. Perhaps he is waiting for me there. He does not know that he is dead! And I shall see him, I feel I shall, standing there with his kind eyes smiling as he watched me up the stairs.”

A rapt expression crept into her face as though he had shaken off his grave-clothes nad stood before her a vision of himself.

“Come, come into the house, Clarice; it is past midnight. The dews are falling, and

if you are ill you will not be able to start at all."

"Ay, that's true ; but we start to-morrow, Jack," she added, peering curiously in his face. "You promise that ? We start to-morrow ! "

"Yes, if you will have it so, to-morrow," he answered, with a weary, bitter sigh.

In her excitement she hurried, almost dragged him to the house, as though she would overtake to-morrow before its hour had come.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

UNTO THIS LAST !

ALL night Clarice lay tossing restlessly on her bed ; occasionally she dozed drowsily for a space, then started up, eagerly inquiring “if it was not almost morning.”

All night the faithful Katrina watched by her, as she had watched through many a night before, with sore misgivings and sorrow in her heart. Towards daybreak Clarice fell into a quiet sleep, which lasted some hours ; when she woke the glad sun

was streaming in at her window, its fingers of light toying daintily with her golden hair. She called hurriedly to her nurse.

“ Make haste—we must dress quickly, Katrina. We are going to start for home to-day ! Jack has promised, and he always keeps his word.”

She started up in her bed, swayed to and fro, then fell back upon her pillow gasping for breath. “ Wait—wait a minute—I am not so strong as I thought. I shall be better soon—don’t go—and—don’t tell Jack ! ”

She had scarcely uttered the last words when she fainted dead away, and all their efforts failed to recover her. They sent for the nearest doctor, who knew better how to deal with the case ; but even he, with all his resources, was some time before he could recall her to consciousness. When he at last succeeded, she was weak and vague,

and wandering, but her wandering thoughts were all bent upon the coming journey.

The doctor looked grave. She had sustained some very severe shock to the nervous system, he said ; and that, combined with her normally fragile delicate state, was at least alarming. She would require great care, and must be kept very quiet—free from all excitement. Obedience to the doctor's instructions in this matter was almost impossible. It is a difficult thing to keep an excitable patient quiet ; you may curb the tongue, bind the limbs, rein in the speech, but you cannot control the brain, and keep that from working ; indeed it cannot control itself. To please Jack, Clarice would refrain from talking, at least from talking much, and be still and quiet. So she lay for some days, the brain seeming clearer ; but the frail beautiful body grew weaker and weaker, and the voice fainter day by day, while the

eager longing to return home lessened and lessened, till she ceased to speak of it.

One day, when Jack and the doctor had remained in the adjoining room conferring together longer than usual, and Jack returned with a sad-stricken expression of countenance, which he could not for the moment control, Clarice glanced at him sharply.

“ You’ve been talking about me, Jack ! ” she said. “ It is no use your turning away your head. What does the doctor say ? ”

“ He says that I must not think of taking you back to England yet—you are not fit to travel,” he answered, looking miserably conscious that he was telling only half the truth.

“ He says something else, Jack. He says I am travelling to another world ! I know it—and I am travelling fast too, thank God ! thank God ! I did not think He would take

me away so soon ! ” and her pale face lightened with a smile.

“ How can you be glad ? ” said Jack, reproachfully, “ when you are leaving me wretched and alone ! ”

“ No, no ! it is only while I am here that you are miserable. I have always been a trouble to you, dear, kind old Jack ! ” she added, tenderly laying her thin white hand in his broad brown palm. “ You’ve been so kind and good ! and *I—I* have given you nothing but pain and grief always—and then this last”—she shuddered and closed her eyes for awhile ; then she added, “ Jack, when I am gone, you will feel like Christian when he dropped his burden from his back ! ”

“ Oh, Clarice darling, don’t talk so ! live ! I am sure you *can* live, if you will only try.”

“ Why should I try ? How *could* I live, you foolish fellow ! Can’t you understand

that *to me*, life would be far crueler than death ! You must know that. I am glad to go—glad—for I shall see him again there ; shall walk with him hand in hand beyond the stars, and tell him—but he knows, he knows ! My great anguish and misery is all past, Jack ! I suppose it is because I shall see him again so soon ! ”

She lay dreamily back, looking out upon the beautiful white orange groves. Jack’s haggard eyes were fixed upon her with yearning hopelessness ; he could not control his voice to speak. After a while she reached out her hand and lifted her eyes to his, saying—

“ I don’t want to go quite yet—not quite yet, Jack ! I want you to do something for me—something to make me quite happy before I die—will you do it ? ”

“ There is nothing on earth I would not do ! What is it, dear ? ”

“ Telegraph to Hugh ! tell him to come soon—at once ! ”

She saw his face fall, and added with eager pleading—“ Be good to me to the last—you won’t fail me now ! ”

“ No,” he answered, and went straight-way to do her bidding.

This was the bitterest task of all ! her last thought—her last look—her last word, would be for—that other ! Well, life seemed dreary work all round just now, and one pain more or less, what did it matter ? He tried to persuade himself that it mattered not at all, so that *she* was content. For years and years Clarice had been his life—his world. He had thought of *her* before himself always. It was only natural it should be so to the end. He would never fail her, even in this last desire. The telegram thus sent, bidding him come at once to Florida, was that which had caused Hugh Spencer such exuberant

joy. “News at last!” he had shouted to the empty air, his heart bounding with hope new-born.

Jack knew that Clarice hated to see him look gloomy, so he summoned all the cheerfulness he could into his face, and answered her questioning eyes and set her mind at rest. The next morning came the answering telegram. It ran thus—

“Coming. I start at once.”

“How long before he can be here?” she inquired, in low, failing tones.

“My darling, I am afraid we cannot expect him in less than two weeks,” he answered.

“So long,” she moaned, turning her head restlessly from side to side. “Oh, Jack! hold me fast—don’t let me go—keep me till he comes!”

“I will, dear, I will!” he answered; though he knew full well as he made the

promise that no human power could keep her long from what was coming.

“If you hadn’t brought me away I should be with him now ! ” she moaned. “If I go before he comes it will be your fault—all your fault.”

“For God’s sake, don’t reproach me ! ” he exclaimed, as he fell upon his knees beside her bed, his strong, manly face working with suppressed emotion. “Perhaps it was a blunder ; but I did it for the best—God knows I did ! Clarice dear, *think* what I have to bear ! a wry word from *you* goes through my heart like a knife.”

Never before, nor ever after, did Jack’s strength of manhood so utterly break down.

Clarice now reproached herself more bitterly than she could have reproached him. She threw her arms round his neck, and exclaimed, with all the passion her feeble strength allowed—

“ Forgive me ! I didn’t mean it—how could I ? I wouldn’t vex you for the world —dear, faithful old Jack ! You have been only too good—too true ! You have wasted your life on me, and I wasn’t worth it—I wasn’t worth it ! ” She took his hand and laid her cheek caressingly upon it, and looked in his face with a little tender smile that had lost none of its old witchery. “ You’ve spoilt me always, and I—I’ve given you nothing but pain. Still, you must spoil me to the end. Oh, Jack ! what should I do without you ! ”

The exertion and excitement were almost too much for her ; from that day she rarely spoke, rarely moved ; she lay still, white and wan and weak. She seemed to be nursing her poor little light of life as though she thought, “ It must not go out till he comes.” She kept the telegram under her pillow, and read and re-read it

again and again ; and so the monotonous days and hours passed. This breathless watching and waiting were hard to bear ; care, anxiety, and long, weary watching were beginning to tell upon Jack's iron nerves, for he looked haggard and worn, like the shadow of himself.

At last the day dawned when it was possible, if all had gone favourably by land and sea, Hugh Spencer might arrive. She knew it, for she had watched the days go by with eager eyes. She had lain still and silent so long, but now she seemed to have gathered all her failing energies together ; her nerves were quivering with excitement, her eyes glittered, and a pink flush suffused the cheeks that were so wan and pale. They opposed her in nothing now, and she insisted on being dressed, and was particular in the selection of what she would wear. Strange that she should give so much care

to her toilette so near the last, but she did, and was very difficult to please, too. She would have on one of her cream-coloured morning dresses, with clouds of filmy lace and ribbons about it; a lace shawl was thrown over her golden head, and she was carried out and laid on her couch under the orange trees, at a point where she would get the first glimpse of Hugh's coming as he passed through the city gates.

How long the hours seemed! The day wore on; she kept her eyes fixed with painful intensity on the road that he would come. She held Jack's hand tightly clasped, and would not let him stir from her side.

“He ought to be here now,” she whispered, with trembling lips. “Nothing has happened! you don't think anything *could* have happened to him? ”

“No, no! he will be here soon, I am

sure—very soon. The boat may have been a little late, dear."

The long, level rays of the low-lying sun lay sharply upon the ground—it would soon set. Her clasp tightened upon his hand as she exclaimed—

"Isn't that a carriage—just coming through the city gate?"

Jack shaded his eyes and looked. Yes, there certainly was a ramshackle something jolting along the road. As it came nearer they recognized the one solitary figure of a man within it.

"Oh, how it creeps! how it creeps! He might make haste," exclaimed Clarice.

It came nearer and nearer still, and as it stopped at the gate a young lithe fellow sprang out of it, and, glancing eagerly round, caught sight of the light dress among the orange trees.

With an exclamation of delight and a

bright joyous face, he ran eagerly towards it. Jack would have gone forward to greet him, but Clarice held him back.

“No—me first!” she exclaimed, in a voice almost inaudible, so shaken by emotion.

Hugh came bounding forward, his face aglow with happy smiles.

A flash that seemed to have almost a sound of light for the moment transfigured her face. She rose to her feet!—she, who for two whole weeks had scarcely lifted a finger, stood straight up with outstretched hands, and in another moment, with a joyful exclamation, Hugh’s arms were round her; and so, clasped in each other’s arms, only a babble of broken, loving words fell from their lips.

With a bitter sigh Jack turned away—he was not needed there; and he went for a solitary stroll among the orange trees, keep-

ing near enough to be within hail in case he might be wanted.

The first ecstatic moment of meeting over, the flush of excitement faded from her face and left it ashen pale; her strength left her, and, with half-closed eyes, she lay limp and helpless in his arms.

With an exclamation of anxiety he laid her on the sofa.

Jack hurried forward.

“What is it?” inquired Hugh; “is she ill?”

His voice brought the colour back to her cheeks, and, speaking low and faint with laboured breath, she answered him—

“I am dying, Hugh! my bright, beautiful Hugh!” Her eyes lingered with yearning tenderness on his face—“I only waited—God let me stay—He would not take me till you had come!”

“What does she mean? What have you

been doing to her?" he exclaimed, making his bewildered appeal to Jack—who answered nothing, only looked grave, and adjusted the cushion at her head. No words could have been so eloquent as that silence was.

"My God! can it be true!" he muttered in an undertone, gazing on her with shocked, despairing eyes. "Oh, my love! my darling! you will live now that I have come!"

"No," she said; "I only waited for this. I *could* not die till I had seen you once more. I am glad—glad to go! If you knew—if you only knew, you would shrink from me—that would be worse than death. Don't tell him, Jack—don't tell him—till I've gone!"

Hugh groaned in spirit. What did it all mean—the few first bright, happy love-days, then that long, terrible waiting—one thrill of hope and joy, now—*this!*

"Don't forget me, Hugh—at least, not too soon! I've so much to say," she added, her fingers straying among his brown curls, "but I've so little breath; we'll talk more to-morrow. Lift me up—there, so—I want to see the sunset."

He lifted her up, keeping his arm round her. Her head drooped upon his breast; her eyes were upturned to his face—not seeking the sunset; then they closed restfully—and feebly, blindly, she reached one pale, wan hand out to Jack.

Silent and miserable these two men sat watching as the breath came soft and low through her half-parted lips. They neither stirred. Her head was on Hugh's breast; her hand lay cold and passive in Jack's faithful clasp.

"She is sleeping," whispered Hugh; "don't you think—that—perhaps she will be better when she wakes?"

“Perhaps!” answered Jack, briefly.

But the curtain fell slowly upon the last act of her tragic life. She never woke again.

EPILOGUE.

ON that evening, under the shadow of the orange trees, Hugh Spencer heard the elucidation of that tragic mystery which had so perplexed the world of Penally, and set the vigilance of the police authorities at naught. In hushed tones the one spoke—and in awestruck, sorrowing silence the other listened; and though their lips did not speak the words, their hearts blessed God that all was well with *her* at last. Life would have been one long scene of remorseful torture. Death gave her rest and peace.

Carrying out her own desire, they left her there in that lovely “land of flowers.” She had so often expressed her horror of “taking the dead upon their travels.”

The two men, Hugh and Jack, grew to be fast friends ; the dead girl was a link between them. Both had loved, both grieved for her, and each grasped the hand of the other with a feeling that was stronger than mere commonplace friendship for “her dear sake.”

They went home to England together, and down to Penally, where Jack found many most melancholy duties awaiting him. He was greeted with cordial sympathy and geniality wherever he went. The Rectory opened its doors to him, and insisted on his remaining its guest. Mrs. Spencer, in his behalf, extended the operations of her larder, and though she half ruined herself in one way, she had a very shrewd idea of recoup-

ing herself in another. Miriam helped to make their fireside home to him. She let her musical genius rest in the shade—*that* would, by contrast, have jarred too much upon his feelings ; but she was always ready to talk to him of Clarice. He found in her a most congenial companion, and by degrees began to realize in her society a quiet content. Talking of Clarice led them to talk of themselves ; and when Jack left on either a long or short visit to London, a consignment of books, magazines or music, &c., arrived at regular intervals at the Rectory. And Miriam—well, there was sunshine in her heart as well as on her face ! Her spring days opened bright with promise ; and there we leave her.

In the common course of events, M. Lemaire grasped all he had coveted—nay more, for as his daughter's legitimate heir he inherited all that Mr. Fleming had

bequeathed to her. “ Such is the irony of fate ! ” He did not, however, long enjoy his triumph ; his evil genius lay in wait, and before he had well entered into possession, one dark night he walked into a deep pond on his own grounds, and was drowned and smothered in the mud thereof.

THE END.

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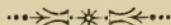
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